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"I'M DUNN—DAN DUNN, IN FROM THE RANGE ON A MILK-AND-WATER JAMBOREE."

OR, THE
Gambler Broker's Short-Stop.
BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

A COWBOY IN DISTRESS.

"I SAY, pardner, is it a reg'lar stampede, or jest the spring round up? Looks mighty like the critters was millin', but all o' my lookin' hain't lit onto ary cow-puncher, nur all o' my two ears hain't ketched nary boy splittin' the thrapple o' him with psalm chunes!"

"What lay are you on?" demanded the person addressed, bristling with professional suspicion, as he keenly scanned the face and figure before him. "Seems to me I've seen you before!"

With a quick motion the cowboy caught the officer's hand, as he ejaculated:

"Putt her thar, pard! Feels like a long-lost brother jest to bear you say *that*! Blamed ef I wasn't fearin' I'd fergit my own self, ef I was to

putt in 'nother day nigh this almighty round-up! An' I'm too durned bashful fer to bell myself! So, ef you hear tell of a Maverick gittin' roped down in this neck o' woods, jest sing out you know the breed, an' let the knife an' brandin'-iron go rest!"

A faint smile crept through the stern suspicion as the policeman keenly watched the eager speaker. He saw his mistake now. This was no masquerading "crook," but the genuine article, still with the dust of "the trail" on his garments, so to speak. And so open-hearted, so honest-eyed, so frankly innocent of city wiles and snares, that the officer could not help dropping a warning word:

"That's all right, stranger, and I'll keep an eye open your way. But don't try to find too many friends, and keep your pockets buttoned. The town is full of crooks, and this is their feeding ground. If a gang should tackle you, steer for the first helmet you can see!"

A surge of the crowd separated them before the cowboy could make response, but, as the policeman moved away, he caught a confident, self-reliant gesture, and the words:

"Don't you worry, pard! I never was roped, yit, an' them as tries it on this drive'll be fit to tell ye jest how it feels fer to swallow a couple o' long-horns, beginnin' at the wrong end o' thar's stomachs—wal, now, they jest will!"

It was the busiest hour of the day at the Union Depot, Kansas City, where there is always a hurrying, bustling, noisy crowd, free to come and go as they please, with no barriers, no locked and guarded gates to keep the spidery network of rails free of intruders, with only a depot-master and an occasional gray-coated and helmeted policeman to aid in keeping order. Incoming and outgoing trains were whistling shrilly, their bells clanging, steam discharging, wheels pounding over joints and switches, adding to the bewildering confusion of the moment.

With arms akimbo the cowboy, his broad-brimmed felt pushed far back from his forehead, stood staring in half-anxious curiosity at the mass of humanity, too deeply interested to notice, much less resent, the frequent pushes and knocks which his obstructing person received.

He was tall, graceful in shape, after an athletic fashion. His features were regular and clean-cut as those of a cameo, with a healthful tinge of sunburn on his blonde face. His hair was worn long, falling to his shoulders in golden curls, while mustaches and imperial of the same hue adorned his face.

A light flannel shirt, with rolling collar and silken tie, showed his muscular chest and arms to perfection. About his waist was a belt with loops for fixed ammunition, though, of course, both cartridges and "guns" were absent. His trousers were of heavy gray jeans, "reinforced" with buckskin, shiny from long contact with the saddle, their lower ends hidden in high-topped boots of fine leather, polished to the very ears, with heels so high and slender that they would hardly have disgraced a lady's boots.

"Whar they come from, an' whar they're goin'—hello, pard!" and he braced himself to resist the shock as a tall figure ran violently against him. "Lost yer eyes in the crowd, hain't ye?"

"Didn't go to—eh?" with sudden interest in reddened eyes as they rose to that half-smiling, half-frowning face. "Jim McGill—or is it?" his eagerness abruptly subsiding as he brushed a hand hastily across his face, as one mechanically tries to clear his vision.

"Nary Jim, pard," with a light laugh. "Sorry I can't answer to yer hail, but I'm Dunn—Dan Dunn, in from the range on a milk-and-water jamboree. No takin' a town that kin turn out a crowd like this, pard! It's better'n a circus jest to look on an' see—"

Dan Dunn broke off abruptly as the tall stranger gave a muffled groan, and a single sweep of his keen blue eyes took in his person.

Though his garb was new, of custom-cut, there was a subtle something which spoke of the far-away cattle trail. It might have been the pearl-gray hat with leather band and broad brim, or it might have been something in the man himself, but almost any person observing him then would have set him down as a genuine cowboy, fresh from the range. The pin in his scarf was a golden whip and spur. A gold-plated image of an ox hung as a charm from his watch-chain.

He was taller than Dan Dunn himself, but much more slender, without being what could be called gaunt or bony. His skin was dark almost as that of an Indian, his eyes of jetty blackness, with reddened circles about them that told of dissipation or protracted grief. His hair was cut short, and his face clean-shaven save for lately-trimmed mustaches.

"Nary Jim—an' I might 'a' knowed it!" with a short, quick catching of his breath as he forced a sickly smile. "No sech luck in mine, though I thought I ketched a whiff o' the trail, an' you're 'nough like Jimmy McGill, o' the Crossbar Ranch fer to play twin onto his old mammy! Eyes, was it, pardner?" with a short, bitter laugh. "Ef the sight ain't washed clean out of 'em, they're proof ag'in salt water, sure!"

"Sure, honey, it's mighty little toime ye've

got to spind in idle chatterin' outside av business, d'ye moind, now?" interposed a short, squat, red-headed Irishman, a thickly-freckled hand touching his comrade's arm. "Av they's anything to be done—an' the bloody thrain to l'ave insoide this same hour—bad luck to the name av it!" cutting himself short to spit over his left shoulder in the direction of the cars, by way of a silent curse. That was Darby—Darby Devine.

With a sudden glow in his little rat-like eyes, Darby turned to keenly, swiftly examine the face of the first cowboy, muttering:

"Thry him, annyhow, laddy-buck! Av it's no bigger help than a wee worrud av comfort ye'll be gettin', sure that's betther nor be 'atin' out the harrut o' ye in this moighty hullabaloo an'—divil fly away wid me av I don't make wan more effort to foind the boss!"

"Flag at half-mast, union down, pard?" bluntly asked the cowboy, his bright gray eyes seeming to take all in at a glance.

The stranger was staring after Darby as that worthy skurried away through the restless crowd, but he turned with a start at this address, his eyes dimmed as he forced a wan smile to his face.

"Worse than that, stranger. I'm left afoot, a thousand miles from camp, with a blizzard wakin' up—an' me stripped to the buff!"

"Been playin' some other man's game, eh?"

The stranger shook his head, half-turning away at that low, light laugh. But then, as though acting on an uncontrollable impulse, he faced Dan Dunn with moistened eyes and quivering lips, speaking hurriedly:

"I can't help it, pard! They's somethin' o' the range about ye that tenders the sore heart o' me—I've got to tell ye how it come about, even ef ye can't do me no help!"

He caught the cowboy's arm, moving slowly along the crowded platform, speaking earnestly, hastily, his voice low and husky.

"Two weeks ago this day, thar wasn't a lighter-hearted man in all the Panhandle than Dave McCoy—that's me, pardner! We had grubbed along until we'd got a little range, fairly stocked; that's Brother Ben and me. Now—pard, I'm taking him to the pore ole mammy, in a tight box!"

His voice choked, and though he forced a smile, it seemed ghastly. Dan Dunn said nothing, but his strong fingers closed over the hand of his fellow in distress with a grip that wrote his sympathy in red lines.

"Blame the smoke!" coughed McCoy, as an engine puffed past them. "It tickles the throat o' me an' fills my eyes with water."

"Let 'em drip, pard," softly muttered Dunn, squaring his broad shoulders as a shield against the crowd. "Ef anybody axes the wharfo', I'll try to answer 'em. Crowd or no crowd, a brother is a brother; an' never nearer to his twin then when in a tight box! I've bin thar!"

"Then—but I can't ax it—an' you a clean stranger! I don't ax it, but—pard, I've got to tell ye the story or bu'st wide open!"

"We was sortin' out a bunch o' fat cattle fer market, Ben an' me, ye know. We'd got all ready fer the drive to the place o' shippin'. Then they was a row—I wasn't nigh, at the time. Never mind how it come to start; Ben cut his swath clean through the gang, but at the end of the line he fell out—his heart cut wide open!"

McCoy turned away his face, shaking like a leaf from head to foot. Dan Dunn said nothing, though his fair face was filled with honest sympathy as he watched the afflicted brother.

Just beyond he caught a glimpse of Darby Devine slowly approaching, blank failure written in his red face, showing in every reluctant movement of his squat figure.

A short, wiry lad in gray came along, giving a shrill whistle of recognition as his rat-like eyes fell upon the tall figure of the cowboy in distress.

"Hit 'em, fu'st clatter! David McCoy, ef I ain't 'way off my base?"

The tall cowboy gave a start at the sound of his name, mechanically clearing the mist from his eyes as they rested on the impish face which peered knowingly into his own.

"Dispatch, boss! Up at the stock-yards, but they said I'd run up ag'in ye down this way. Plenty o' time, but ef ye could hurry a bit meb-be it'd save me my sit."

McCoy took the brown envelope, tearing it open with fingers that trembled visibly. A single glance seemed sufficient to take in the few words of writing, and a choked groan rose in his throat as he staggered back, one hand rising to his heart.

"No bad news I hope, pard?" ventured Dan Dunn, hesitatingly.

The sound of his voice seemed to nerve the cowboy, and drawing a dollar from his pocket he paid the messenger of evil tidings, signed the book, and waved him away.

"Divil a foind kin I foind him at all!" broke in the voice of Darby at this juncture. "More be token they say now he's out av town, an' not to be comin' back the wake—bad luck folly him, sav I!"

Dave McCoy forced a laugh, harsh and hollow, as he thrust the open dispatch into the hand of his Irish partner.

"Read that, pard! It's from Molly—my sis-

ter. It says to come quick—that mother is dyin'! Tell 'em I—I couldn't! Tell 'em—tell 'em I fell under the cars, and—"

He broke off abruptly as a heavy freight engine came pounding by, and flinging down his hat he strode forward as though bent on finding a speedy release from all his troubles in death under the wheels.

CHAPTER II.

AN AVALANCHE OF WOE.

BUT Darby Devine was even swifter in his actions, leaping forward and dragging his comrade back from the horrible death he seemed seeking, clinging to him tightly as he hoarsely panted:

"Lind a hand, mon! Will ye sthand by an' saa a poor, grafe-crazed craythure shuicide himsilf widout turnin' the finger av ye to save him to his widdied mammy an' shister? Don't ye, honey! Brace up an' b a mon, av—Aisy, will ye?" scowling blackly at Dan Dunn, who sprung to his assistance. "Is it a freight-car ye think ye're haulin' back an' foorth?"

For a brief space Dave McCoy struggled against them, then weakly yielded as they hurried him away from the tracks, passing around the end of the great building. And though so many persons were passing to and fro, not one seemed to realize how narrowly a tragedy had escaped being enacted before their very eyes.

"Let up, mates," muttered McCoy, with a long breath, shaking himself free from their friendly grasp. "It's past—I'll not give way like that ag'in. I reckon I was clean locoed—the thoughts o' mother dyin' thar, with only pore Molly to watch her—an' Ben in a box—an' me stuck here—"

A fit of shivering choked his words off, and the squat Irishman tightened his grip again, as though expecting another mad attempt at suicide.

"Sure, it's harrud—moighty harrud! Divil baste the dirthy thafe as robbed ye, honey dear! Sure, I'd agraa to spind a thousand y'ars in Purgathory my own silf jist for wan grup at the villin's windpoipe—so I w'u'd, now, an' divil a loie in the whole av it!"

"If it ain't crowdin' ye too hard, pard, what's the racket, anyhow?" quietly asked Dan Dunn, sympathy fairly lighting up his fair face.

Dave McCoy tried to reply, but then turned to Darby, with a sign for him to speak instead. The squat Irishman was nothing loth, though through all he maintained his grip, gradually drawing the afflicted cowboy further away from the network of tracks, and at the same time clearing the busy, bustling throng of men and women.

"Sure, it's a parfict hail-storm av woe that's poored down an' tap o' the craythure, sor, an' divil a loie in it all, nayther!" he muttered in a husky aside to the sympathetic cowboy. "An' av it's a harrut o' flesh an' blood, not a turnip av sthene ye've got in the buzzum av ye, it's ye'll be sayin' divil the wondner the poor b'ye troid to bloody the whales av that ingine—so ye will, now!"

With an effort Dave McCoy regained his self-control sufficiently to steady his voice, seeming to feel that Darby, in his intense sympathy, would forget facts in his fancy.

"I wouldn't trouble you even so far, stranger, only for the scent o' the trail that I ketched, fu'st off," he said, giving the cowboy's hand a sudden, brief pressure. "It's a bitter sad story to tell, but I owe you that much, anyway, for jumping your reservation as I did, through a mistake. You looked so much like Jimmy McGill—an' I needed a sound pard so mighty bad, jest then!"

"Wish't I was Jim, fer your sake, then," responded Dunn, his gray eyes keenly yet kindly fixed on the haggard face of the other. "Ef a dollar or two—"

With a swift motion Dave McCoy cut his speech short. He even forced a laugh; harsh and ghastly enough.

"It's wuss then that, pard, though I'm thankin' of ye in my heart fer the offer. But—let me tell ye just how the trail runs."

"You know Ben—my brother. They downed him fer keeps, when my back was turned. They got off, for then; not but what I'll find 'em ef I live long enough! But that don't count, now."

"As I told ye, we hed a bunch o' steers all ready loaded fer this place, when Ben got killed. We was both comin' with the cattle, partly fer a rest, but more to pay a visit home, to see mother an' Molly—that's my sister, pard."

"I couldn't leave Ben back thar. I knowed mother wouldn't never git over it. An' she too old an' aillin' fer to ever git fur enough to drop a tear on his grave. So—waal, the boys helped box Ben up, an' I shipped him to this place, by Express."

"Divil burn that same Ixpress!" sharply breathed Darby Devine.

"It was all hurry an' worry, then, as you may guess, pard," added McCoy, with a curious gulp as though trying to swallow something that would persist in rising in his throat. "I never thought—and why should I? I hed money enough in my pocket. But—waal, we shipped

the box here, an' I lowed to pay the charges when we come to Kansas City."

"Who wouldn't the same?" muttered Darby, pursing his lips sourly. "An' him wid two hundred fat steers to the back av 'im?"

"Darby came with me, ye mind," added McCoy, rallying again. "I was to leave him here to see to the bunch; to yard 'em an' sell 'em an' then follow after me with the money they'd fetch."

"An' it's a rich mon I'd be, for a while, anyhow!" dolefully interjected the Irishman, smacking his lips at the thought. "Two hundred av 'em, an' divil burn the wan o' the lot as 'll fall behind fourteen hunder' on the averidge, an' thim sellin' at clane four cints on the huff! Huggin' twelve thousan' dollars the lot! An' the loikes av him, d'ye moind, now, pit in the divil's own box jist fur the want av a few dirty dollars! Oh, the bad luck av it all, thin!"

Dan Dunn glanced swiftly from one face to the other, then back again, his hands fumbling at his waist, his gray eyes glowing brightly. But before he could speak, Dave McCoy resumed his sad recital:

"I was worn out, more with grief over Ben, an' knowin' how bitter black news I hed to be totin' home to the old mother, mind ye, than by hard work. An' so I must have slept mighty sound on the way. For—when I struck this ranch, I was clean plucked!"

"Lost all your money?" muttered Dan Dunn, soberly.

"Every dollar! An' with them went my ticket, which I'd bought clean through, not meanin' to lay over here even for a hour," gloomily nodded the afflicted cowboy.

"An' you never knowed how or when it all went?"

McCoy forced a laugh, hard and bitter, as he replied:

"They was only one stiff come in on my train, stranger, an' that was my brother Ben! But I reckon I've got them as went through my clothes marked down. Mebbe I'll run up ag'inst 'em one o' these days. Ef I do—"

"Divil pity the dirty craythures, thin!" nodded Darby Devine.

"I didn't worry so mighty bad over the money, mind ye, jest then, though it come hard to think o' layin' over a day in town with pore Ben boxed up like that!" shivering anew as he spoke. "After all, it would only be one day more on the road. I could easy run off the cattle, without waitin' for a better market. But when I found I'd have to wait four hours for my train, I thought mebbe we could make the rifle anyhow. So I hurried out the hoofs an' got a stock-yard receipt fer 'em, all reg'lar, but the firm I'd consigned 'em to wasn't to be found, an' I didn't know who else to refer to. So, you see, I'm all tied up!"

"An' now—w'u'st of all!—comes this dispatch from Molly. You kin see fer yourself, stranger, how it reads," thrusting the bit of paper into the cowboy's hand.

"Mother is dying. Come at once."

"MOLLIE."

These were the words Dan Dunn read, and brief though the message was, it contained volumes, when taken in connection with the sad story told by David McCoy.

"You see how it is, pardner," muttered McCoy, turning aside his head as one hand crossed his reddened eyes with a swift, impatient gesture. "Ef I hed the money, I could ketch my train even yit, ef I hed to leave pore brother Ben ahind fer Darby to reship. But—waal, do you wonder much that I was crazy enough fer to think the stonest an' easiest way through was under them big wheels?"

"Niver think o' that, man dear," soothingly uttered Darby, patting the cowboy on an arm, much as a parent might try to soothe a grieving child. "Sure, isn't it poor Molly ye'd ought to be thinkin' av? W'u'd ye lave the loikes av her all alone to suffer? W'u'd ye—but I knows ye w'u'dn't, now ye've come back to the town moind av ye!"

Dave McCoy shook off the kindly hand, but not in anger. It seemed as though he could not bear even the sympathy of his rough friend, just then. But as he turned away, he gave a start and uttered a low cry.

"That's him, now!" he panted, catching his breath, staring at a heavily-built, roughly-clad man drawing near, whip in hand.

"B'in lookin' fer you heap o' while, stranger," brusquely called out the man, running one hand into his bosom and bringing forth a bit of paper as he added: "I hate to crowd ye, w'u'st kind, but business is business, an' sech business as this can't be made to wait over. The boss says he can't hev that long box layin' round the depot, here, an' ef you ain't ready to pay the charges onto it, I'll hev to haul it to the up town office right off!"

"Give me 'nother hour, pard," brokenly muttered McCoy, gulping down that painful swelling in his throat, casting a longing glance over the hurrying crowd. "Stall the boss off until my train pulls out, anyway. In sech a mighty crowd as this, a man'd orter find one good fri'nd!"

The expressman shook his head, sullenly.

"Ef it was only me, you wouldn't hev to ax twice, stranger. But it ain't. It's the boss. An' he's p'izen skeered 'bout boxes like them. Says it's wuss then snakes in his boots, hev' 'em layin' round so keerless. An' so—ef you cain't pay the charges, reckon I'll hev to run it up-town fer the while."

Dave McCoy hesitated, visibly struggling with himself for a moment, then abruptly turning to Darby Devine to utter:

"You've got the receipt from the stock-yards, Darby?"

"Faith an' I have, sor!" and the squat Irishman plunged a hand into the bosom of his dirty shirt as though the required document was buried a foot deep.

Dave McCoy took the paper, glancing hastily over it, then holding it out toward Dan Dunn, saying:

"Run your eyes over it, pard, an' see ef what I've told ye is all on the squar!"

In silence the cowboy took the paper. So far as he could tell, it was made out in due form, and was all it purported to be, a receipt from the stock-yards company stating that two hundred head of three-year-old steers had been received from David McCoy, consigned to Messrs. Winkler & Meyers, giving the number of the pens in which they had been confined, together with other particulars which need not be repeated in this connection.

"It looks all right, pardner," slowly uttered Dan Dunn, looking up to meet that anxious, longing gaze.

"An' the finest bunch av hoofs ye iver clapped the two eyes av ye an' this munny a long day!" quickly affirmed Darby Devine. "Fourteen hunder' the averidge—no less! An' divil the runt or chripple in the lave o' thim, nayther!"

The burly expressman peered over the cowboy's shoulder, uttering a long whistle as he noted the contents, to utter:

"With that to back ye up, stranger, you shouldn't have much trouble in makin' the raise! I'd advance the charges my own self, if I had the ready cash—and jump at the chance! Why don't you try the stock-yard men?"

"They don't make advances to strangers, even with such security," was the gloomy response; then, with trembling longing in eyes and tones he turned to Dan Dunn, faintly uttering:

"I hate to ax it, pardner, but ef you could—ef you would—"

"Takin' the receipt as s'eurity, of course," nodded the expressman.

"Darby will do all the rough work. All you need is to watch an' see that the sale is all right, then get your money. Ef it wasn't fer this," with a misty glance at the crumpled telegram, "I wouldn't think o' crowdin' of ye, pard, but—ef ye kin, I'll never fergit it!"

"How much be the charges?" asked Dan Dunn, smiling brightly.

"Only two hundred dollars on the box," panted McCoy, eagerly.

"Only that? An' you're bothered so bad 'bout sech a flea-bite?"

"An' one hundred back charges," amended the expressman, quickly.

CHAPTER III.

THE NABOB OF QUALITY HILL.

ROUGH and unsightly as portions of Kansas City are and must always remain, despite all the improvement money, skill and art can bring about, it still can boast of many natural beauties, besides those in which nature has been married to art—and improved.

On her many hills are to be found beautiful building spots, where wealth and culture has settled down to enjoy the good things of life, in mansions which would be a credit to many an older city.

Years ago, in "the good old days," yet not so far distant but that some who still call themselves young can remember, what is now popularly known as "Quality Hill" was then considered far out of town and nearly as worthless for residence as for business purposes. Yet, even then, the spot was beautiful, after a rough and rugged fashion, if only for the widely extended view which it afforded.

The crest of a high, rugged bluff, rising abruptly from the flat, broad "bottom" formed by the junction of the "River Kaw" with the Missouri itself, at that day covered with a dense growth of giant trees and tangled undergrowth, cut here and there by crooked "sloughs" where the muddy waters backed up from either river during times of flood.

All that has vanished now; all that was unsightly has been removed, until only the beautiful and the useful remain.

From Quality Hill one can look down at the mazy network of iron trails leading to all quarters of our country, centering at the Union Depot, where trains are arriving and departing constantly, amid a burly-burly, rush and crush, cry and clamor sufficient to daze and deafen a far more sophisticated person than our honest cowboy seemed to be.

To the right of the depot, with its elevated cable station and its single row of ticket-offices

and eating-houses, auction rooms and lottery dens in disguise, where hundreds of nimble-tongued, brazen-cheeked "decoys" stand ready to tackle any or all of the hurrying mass, tower high in air the mighty elevators. Beyond them sweeps the mighty river in a broad, grand curve of miles upon miles.

From Quality Hill you can look down upon the "State Line Depot," where Kansas is joined to Missouri, and an imaginary line divides Kansas City, Kansas, from its elder, richer, handsomer, larger sister, while a little further on your gaze rests upon the vast collection of packing-houses which have given still another name, "Armourdale," to a portion of the rapidly spreading "City of the Kaw."

Still further on you note the broad, sluggish "Kaw" or Kansas River, spanned by bridge after bridge, until it vanishes far away to the south. Across this band of water Wyandotte lifts her many smoke-stacks and chimneys, covering the hills with dwellings, more in number now than Kansas City herself could boast during the early days of the Civil War.

Still further reaches the eye, marking the course of the big river, now looking like an enormous band of silver under the sunlight, gaining beauty through remoteness. Its southern bank is guarded by a rocky range, tree-crested and seemingly as wild as when the red-man alone occupied the land. On the other side stretches the low, rich lands of Clay county, with farms and farm-houses dotting the vista.

Dim and indistinct, miles up the river one can catch a glimpse of Quindaro, named after the famous red chief whose name is immortalized in story.

All this, and much more, the curious eye can discover from the rise of Quality Hill; but it is an old story to the man and woman who were being slowly driven away from their home in a rich, yet sober-seeming landau, on the same afternoon which found Dan Dunn marveling at the rushing "round-up" at the Union Depot.

The driver was too busy maintaining his stiff, prim, "correct" attitude on the box, and with curbing his spirited bays to the slow, dignified pace which their owner, Stuart Meredith, banker and capitalist, rigidly prescribed while he occupied a place behind them.

"The Nabob of Quality Hill," he had been dubbed in jest, to accept the title in sober earnest, until now it was as familiar to his friends and business associates as his real name.

Tall, spare, slow in speech and cold of voice, Stuart Meredith was looking back toward his residence, the richest among the rich, rising grandly from its spacious grounds; "worth a modest fortune per front foot!" as he often whispered to himself.

That was the key to his character. Gold was the only god Stuart Meredith worshiped; the only test by which he weighed his fellow-beings.

"I had another offer for the place, yesterday, Linnet," he remarked, his still brilliant black eyes shifting to the fair face at his side.

"But you will not sell, father?" quickly cried the maiden, a tinge of scarlet leaping into her wax-like cheeks. "Just as we are growing at home in the beautiful place? Say, you do not think of selling!"

The nabob laughed a laugh which, in almost any other man would have sounded like a sneer, yet it corresponded perfectly with that proudly aristocratic face, with those thin, straight lips. "Not while 'the boom' is on, child, at all events."

"Nor ever, I trust," with another quick yet yearning glance at the beautiful grounds and magnificent mansion, just then fading from sight. "A year ago I would not have cared so much, but now—it seems like home, and—mother drew her last breath there!"

Softly her tones sunk, and it is possible that Stuart Meredith failed to catch her meaning aright, for he turned to look ahead, with a scarcely perceptible shrug of his narrow shoulders.

Nor did Linnet Meredith repeat her words. Something like a mist came into her great, lustrous orbs as they gazed vacantly across the expansive view which lay stretched before them at that moment. There was a slight quiver agitating her red lips, and she seemed to shrink a little further from that slender, precise figure by her side.

In silence the drive was continued, the wheels rolling noiselessly over the wooden pavement, recently dampened by the sprinklers so that not a particle of dust arose to annoy the passers-by.

These were not many. This portion of the city was still sacred from the contamination of "vulgar trade," and it was yet early for the usual procession of pleasure-seekers in their fine turn-outs. Here and there a footman. Now and then a carriage or buggy, with an occasional horseman. Nothing more.

The sharp clatter of hoofs in their rear, brought a slight frown to the thin, austere face of the nabob, but this vanished as he turned his head to note the rash rider. A glow of recognition shot into his cold eyes, and he whispered to his daughter:

"It is Nicol Faulkner, Linnet. Try to treat him a little more cordially than you have of late. He's one of our smartest, brightest young

men, and before many more years will rank with the highest."

"Of the money-grubbers, you mean!" murmured Linnet, with a barely perceptible shrug of her dainty shoulders.

There was no reply possible, for the horseman reached the side of their carriage and was bowing low, with uncovered head, to Miss Meredith. She acknowledged the salutation, but there was little of warmth in her face or manner just then. If anything, her face was colder, paler than ordinary, despite the warning which she had received.

And yet this Nicol Faulkner was hardly one to awaken feelings of repulsion in the breast of a young lady, judged by his outward graces.

Tall and graceful in build as he was in carriage. Richly, yet neatly dressed. Handsome as a demigod in face, with a clear, pleasant voice and most plausible manners. His lips and chin were smooth-shorn, and his luxuriant whiskers were neatly trimmed, yet soft, silken, glossy.

"Delighted to see you again, Miss Meredith," he said, leaning over in his saddle, with an admiring glow in his dark eyes as the words fell softly from his lips. "We could ill afford to lose our Queen of Quality Hill, which—"

"Which I am not, never was nor ever will be, Mr. Faulkner," interposed the lady, with a slight frown and averted face.

The horseman scowled briefly, but his tones were smooth as ever when he spoke again:

"Yours are the only lips whose denial I dare not challenge, Miss Meredith; and I very much doubt if even they could find a second in all the city, for that purpose."

"Very pretty, on my word, but hardly business, Faulkner," laughed the nabob, exerting himself more than usual lest worse follow this unaccountable dislike which his daughter had taken to the man of his own choice from all her suitors. "Which reminds me—"

The sentence was never finished. At that moment they were slowly passing in front of a narrow cross-street—hardly more than an alley, in fact, and densely shaded by a double row of trees—when down the steep incline shot a bicycle, its rider frantically ringing his gong as he applied the brake to avoid a collision. This he managed to do, though his bowed figure fairly brushed the noses of the spirited bays as he shot across their path, frightening them until they reared high in the air under the tense reins.

Even then, all might have been well, but for the dampened pavement.

Nicol Faulkner was riding with slack reins, half-turned in his saddle, but he was too good a horseman to be unseated by the quick side-leap of his startled animal alone. But its plates slipped on the damp wooden blocks, and with a sharp neigh it fell heavily on its side, lashing out with all feet in its effort to recover itself and almost upsetting the blood-bays.

With snorts of affright they plunged forward, jerking the driver from his seat to fall with stunning force on his head and shoulders. And thus set at liberty, the terrified creatures broke away in a blind run, the landau swaying and rocking at their heels.

A single scream broke from the lips of the maiden at the fall of the coachman, but then, pale-faced, wide-eyed, she sat in silence, though death or broken limbs seemed inevitable.

With an angry cry that was almost a curse Stuart Meredith rose to his feet, vainly grasping at the lines as they were torn from the unfortunate driver's hands. He reeled, almost falling headlong as the carriage swayed, but saving himself by the railing on the box-seat. And with one frightened glance around as if in search of help the nabob nerved himself for desperate work.

If he could gain the front seat, might he not secure the lines, one of which still clung to the quivering hips of the off horse?

The street was almost deserted when the team began its mad flight, but before two cross-streets were passed men seemed to spring up from every quarter, shouting and yelling as men always do under similar circumstances, some making short, irresolute dashes toward the middle of the street, waving their arms, and even flinging hats in the faces of the terrified horses, only to leap aside when the crucial moment came.

All this but served to still further madden the animals, and now they tore along at top speed, blind with terror, and only the perfectly paved street saved the landau from being upset and wrecked within the first quarter-mile.

Pausing only to steady himself, Meredith climbed over the back of the box-seat and tried to catch the rein which even then was slipping from its frail fastening. It was a perilous feat at the best, but doubly so now, for he had no time to steady himself or time his motions. If the line should drop away before his grip closed upon it—and it did!

At the same instant the landau gave a violent lurch and Stuart Meredith was flung headlong from his perilous perch, fortunately to fall clear of both heels and wheels.

His wild cry seemed to still further frighten the animals, and as their frantic speed increased Linnet closed her eyes with a shiver and an inward prayer for mercy.

A policeman leaped into the street, making a brave clutch at the bits, only to be dragged a few yards, then hurled aside, bruised and bleeding, while the team, turned by his weight, dashed into a narrow cross-street, up a steep incline, beyond which—

"Over the bluff!" cried a score of frightened mortals, recoiling for an instant in horror. "God help the poor child!"

CHAPTER IV.

A LAMB AMONG WOLVES.

"An' the price av a ticket home, d'ye moind!" chimed in Darby Devine, licking his chapped lips as a wolfish glare came into his little blue eyes. "Sure the receipt is good for tin toimes the money, bud av thayre's no ticket how'll ye git to 'm in toime, honey dear?"

A shadow crept into the thin face of the afflicted cowboy at this blunt reminder, and an anxious echo came into his voice as he said:

"It's too much—an' you a stranger, pardner!"

With a sigh, like one resigning all hopes, he briefly wrung the hand of Dan Dunn, his own face averted for an instant.

"Too much—nothin'!" grunted the expressman, tapping the receipt with a stumpy forefinger as he added: "Too much with this? An' horns sellin' at clean four cents for scrubs? An' this callin' for even two hundred head—"

"Foorteen hunder' on an averidge, d'ye moind, now!" murmured Darby, nodding so vigorously that his hat tipped far over his eyes.

Dan Dunn drew back a little, glancing from face to face, but there was a pleasant smile upon his face as he waited for a chance to speak.

The expressman was the first to note this, and he bluntly uttered:

"Hold your hush, Irish, an' give the gent a chance to spit it out. It's pure business, an' a body kin see with half an eye that he's built just that way."

A flush of, it might be, gratified vanity leaped into the handsome face of the cowboy at this, and he laughingly nodded to the driver before addressing Dave McCoy:

"Lump everythin', pardner, an' figger it up. How big a pile does it mount to, anyway?"

"Then you'll—Heaven shower its choicest blessin's all over you, pard!" cried the afflicted one, dashing one hand across his eyes, then grasping Dunn with both hands in an ardent shake.

"Why w'u'dn't he, av he's got the money in his clothes?" spluttered Darby Devine, hopping in a most ludicrous manner from one foot to the other in his excitement. "Tin scoore head, an' ivery wan able to jump over the b'ame wid foorteen hunder' at the ind—an' good as sould at four cints the pound, begorra! What's the use av Nashnal Banks wid the loike av that to the foore, now, I want to know?"

"Four hundred, ef it don't strike you too mighty hard, pardner," hesitatingly muttered Dave McCoy, his dark eyes glowing with what seemed resurrected hopes. "Mebbe I mought git along with a few bits less, but what with the ticket to York State an' the other—"

"Divil a cint less, unless ye walk, an' that'd be too late aven foore the wake, lit alone makin' toime enough to saa the d'are ould leddy wid the brith o' loife inside av her yit—honey dear!"

"Button up, will ye, Irish?" sharply muttered the expressman, with a scowl that emphasized his words. "Fu'st I know the boss'll be howlin' out why the divil I don't load up that blessed box—an' ef he does climb up on his ear once, it's not me that kin hold back the load from makin' quick time to the up-office. Take it or leave it. I've done the best I know, an' now it's clean business. Shall I go, pard?" as he turned bluntly to Dan Dunn.

"If you only could spare the dust fer a single day, pard!" brokenly murmured Dave McCoy, choking down that troublesome lump once more.

"Why w'u'dn't he?" murmured Darby, mechanically, licking his thick lips. "Tin scoore, an' ivery wan—didn't I till ye so, honey?" with a stifled whoop of delight as the handsome cowboy nodded assent.

"Sart'in I'll let you hev it, pardner," with a bright smile on his fine features. "I'd hev said as much long ago, but you kept the trail so mighty crowded I couldn't push fur enough to the front, an'—"

"Heaven bless you for sayin' so, pardner!" huskily panted the afflicted stockman, wringing his benefactor's hands with feverish force. "Only for the poor old mother—only for Molly—an' she alone, an' the mammy dyin'—I cain't tell ye how I feel it, pard, but ef the day ever comes—which Heaven forbid!—that I kin pay back the favor in kind, be sure I'll empty the heart o' me as well as my pockets!"

"Count out the dingbats, an' I'll sign the bill in a jiffy!" the expressman said, turning aside and lifting one knee by way of a desk.

Dan Dunn hesitated, his hands fumbling at his waist, his keen eyes roving over the hurrying crowd which, though they had drawn out of the thick, was still uncomfortably close.

Dave McCoy turned pale as a corpse, his black eyes glowing as if backed by living fire at this.

And Darby Devine even ceased his crazy shuffling to bite his thick lips in breathless suspense.

After all, was it to prove a failure? Had all their efforts gone to waste, even as success seemed fully assured?

But Dan Dunn smiled reassuringly as he met their anxious looks, and lowering his voice he hurriedly uttered:

"I've got the money, an' it's yours in welcome, pard, only—"

"Here's the bill, signed O. K.," briskly uttered the expressman as he turned once more toward Dan Dunn. "Wish I hed as good s'curity. But forty a month an' find myself don't fill a married man's pockets in a hurry—an' him with five kids to eat an' tear up clothes. Eh?"

"How long before this train pulls out?"

"The biggest part of an hour. But why?" suspiciously demanded the fellow, hastily drawing back the receipt, his face clouding anew.

"Good enough!" laughed Dan Dunn. "I'm too durned bashful fer to strip right in the eyes o' sech a mighty stampede as this, but I reckon I could 'a' done it, ef I hed to!"

"Oh!" with a grin and a knowing nod.

"You've got it in a belt? An' mighty right you be, too! They's two-legged wolves 'nough 'round this blessed whirlpool fer to strip you clean naked fer a tin dollar, ef they knowed you hed one 'bout your rags. You're a keener, you air!"

Dan Dunn flushed modestly, but there was a touch of self-conceit in his voice as he uttered:

"I hain't read the papers fer nothin', ef I do smell green! An' ef ary gal ot gits the bulge on me, even in a big camp like this, he's full welcome to all he kin git out o' this thoroughbred! I won't kick!"

"What's the matter wid us takin' a bit av a sthroll up yan-way?" cut in Darby Devine, jerking his head toward the sward-crowned rocks to the southwest, where the base of the high bluffs had been blasted out to make room for the many tracks. "Divil a wan'll be loike to ketch soight av his hoide, thin, lit him sthrip to the loikeness av ould Father Adam himsilf—sure they w'u'dn't, now!"

"Your head's level on top, anyhow, Irish," laughed the expressman, as he tucked a hand through the arm of the cowboy and hurrying in that direction, followed by the other couple, just in time to avoid being separated by a slowly-moving freight-train.

"I didn't dare ask it, but, pardner, you've filled me runnin' over with joy!" brokenly uttered Dave McCoy, as they breasted the steep incline where a path led diagonally up the face of the rocks which still bore the drill-holes and powder-stains of heavy blasting. "It's bad enough at the best, but this'll give me a chainefer to say good-by to the mother—Heaven rest her tired soul!"

"Don't think so much of it, pard," kindly responded Dan Dunn, with a faint smile and a sympathetic light in his blue eyes. "An' try to think that you've left the blackest ahind ye. Try to b'lieve that your good mother'll take a turn for the better afore ye git thar."

"Ef she don't, my comin' 'll be sure death!" with a quivering catch of his breath. "She jest put her hull pile onto Ben! An' she's writ' so often fer him to come back home. An'—he's goin' home, now! Goin' home in a coffin!"

There was a brief silence after that. Not only was the slope difficult for even those in perfect wind and limb to conquer, but there was such utter hopelessness, such pathetic misery in that voice! Even the burly expressman seemed affected; for he took time to blow his nose and clear his throat before again pressing up the rocks!

Darby Devine turned and spat viciously down the rugged way, muttering barely above his breath:

"Av I hed the bloody vill'ins in the grip av me roight now! Av I hed—w'u'dn't I, jist!" and he gave a faithful imitation of pitching said rascals down the rocks!

Softly as he spoke, Dave McCoy caught his meaning, and a hard laugh came gratingly through his clinched teeth as he turned about to say:

"An' I'd play pitch an' toss with you fer doin' of it, Darby, do ye mind that, now? They're my meat, an' I'll round 'em up myself! I'd kill my best fri'nd ef he was to step atween me an' my revenge!"

Even the irrepressible Irishman seemed cowed by this fierce outburst, and not another word was spoken until the party had fairly gained the top of the rocks, on a clear, gently sloping, bit of ground from whence a grand prospect was visible to curious eyes.

But none of the present party seemed to give this a thought. One hasty glance around convinced them that they were in comparative solitude, where their movements would hardly attract attention from outsiders. And then, in cold, calm tones which seemed the result of forced nerve, Dave McCoy held the stock-yards receipt toward his intending benefactor, saying:

"Look it over ag'in, pard, while they's no hurly-burly to mix ye all up. See fer yourself that I'm givin' it to ye straight as a string. For, though I'm in bitter black need o' the ducats, I'd throw the chance over my shoulder an'

let everythin' slide, rather than hev you doubtin' a minnit that I'm givin' ye a clean deal!"

"Don't I know that?" promptly responded Dan Dunn, smiling gravely into that thin, dark countenance, hesitating a little before accepting the paper. "An' I wouldn't think o' takin' it, only I know you'll feel better over it ef I play it's clean business an' no sentiment."

"Which it is, or my name's not Don Fisher!" nodded the expressman, heartily. "That's good as gold, an' I only wish I hed a back-load o' the like for my own fattenin'!"

"Tin scoor, an' niver a runt among 'em!" murmured Darby Devine.

"The paper's all right, of course," nodded Dan Dunn, folding it up and thrusting it into his pocket after a casual examination, which was clearly more for the purpose of pleasing Dave McCoy than satisfying any doubts on his own part.

"An' I reckon you'll find this scrap ditto, pard," laughed Don Fisher, handing in his receipt for the corpse. "Three hundred cases lets me out—an' mighty glad to git shet o' haulin' the box up-town, too, I am!"

Again Dan Dunn glanced cursorily over the paper, and nodded his complete satisfaction as it followed the stock-yards receipt.

"I'll give it back to your mate, pardner, when the cattle are sold off," he said, with a kindly light in his big gray eyes as he did so. "I'd let you have it now, but it'll save your makin' out a note, you sec. An' ef you're to ketch that train, I reckon we hain't none too much time to cut to waste."

"It's all finished but countin' out the dingbats, ye know!" grinned Don Fisher, snapping a thumb and finger significantly in front of the cowboy.

"Then you're clean satisfied?" persisted Dave McCoy, still sensitive on that point, checking the hands of the cowboy, which were unbuckling his belt in order to get at the money receptacle next his skin. "Ef you ain't—"

"Why wouldn't I be?" with a mild laugh and kindly glance. "Didn't I ketch a whiff o' the trail even afore you spoke a word? Couldn't I make out a pard in distress, fu'st off? Let it go at that, mate, an' never trouble your head with Dan Dunn! He's doin' all this with his two eyes wide open tight—he is!"

Dave McCoy offered no further obstructions, but eagerly watched the free-hearted, open-handed cowboy as he opened his garments sufficiently to slip a heavy money-belt from about his waist. And with covetous eyes and bated breath the three human wolves crowded around this innocent lamb to catch the first glimpse of their hard-won prize.

There was a merry chink of metal, and a bright sheen of yellow coin as Dan Dunn opened the belt; but that was all! For a clear, sharp voice just then broke upon their startled ears with:

"Hold hard, stranger! They're confidence men—don't let 'em beat you out of your good money!"

CHAPTER V.

NOT SO GREEN AS HE LOOKED.

WITH one accord all eyes were turned in the direction from whence came that voice, and with the same unanimity curses both fierce and deep burst from the lips of at least three out of the quartette.

"It's that infernal law-sharp!" grated Dave McCoy, viciously.

"Pull out, ye two-legged wolves!" cried the person thus condemned, briskly advancing toward the "crooks" and their intended victim.

"Slug 'im, an' then git!" growled Don Fisher.

"It's ownly two, annyhow!" grated Darby, as he turned and drew back his right hand—armed now with a deadly slung-shot.

Only a breath had passed, as it were, since that first warning cry from the generous stranger, but wonders can be wrought in even less time, and this was quite long enough for Dan Dunn to close the money-belt snugly and wrap the ends about his left hand. And as the Irishman turned with his slung-shot, he saw the cowboy laughing in his face, on guard and looking very unlike a lamb.

"Look out for the hid av yez, Paddy-whack!" cried Dan Dunn, as a deft ducking motion carried his own pate out of danger from that ugly weapon. "Ye want the dingbats mighty bad—an' now you've got 'em!"

And so Darby had—for a single instant. The heavy belt swung round, striking the sturdy fellow alongside his head, sending him end-long a dozen feet away, disposed of once for all, so far as that struggle was concerned.

"Slug him, is it, my dandy bucks?" laughed the cowboy, dropping his novel weapon and "putting up his dukes" in genuine prize ring style as he deftly balanced himself before the two remaining ruffians. "Thought you had a lamb, when I've got a beard long as my horns—and they're two feet in the clear! Thought you'd jumped a gray, fresh out of his haystack, eh? Reckoned your dead-brother racket would turn out a bonanza this trip, for sure? Well—why don't you begin the sluggin'?"

Don Fisher made a rapid dive after the fat

money-belt as it lay on the ground, but with a mocking crow, the cowboy sprung into the air to descend on the rascal's shoulders, shooting out his heels with a force that drove the luckless crook face first to the ground, to roll over and over, checking himself only when in perilous proximity to the verge of the rocky precipice.

"Receipt, is it, pardner?" laughed Dan Dunn, nimbly steadying himself after having thus adroitly disposed of his second enemy. "All it lacks is my signature, and here goes for the writing in red ink!"

Dave McCoy—if such was really the tall crook's rightful name—seemed more than half-paralyzed by the sudden shattering of his airy castles, not to mention the terribly swift manner in which this supposed greenhorn had disposed of two of his partners, and though he tried to guard himself against that lightning-like rush, his hands were dashed aside, and those steel-like fists fell in rapid succession upon his unguarded face, sending him reeling back, bruised and blinded.

Only the two blows; then, laughing merrily, Dan Dunn stepped back to view his handiwork, seemingly satisfied with the punishment he had already inflicted.

That was amply sufficient, at least for the stomachs of the three confidence-men. Darby Devine was already scrambling over the edge of the rocks. Don Fisher, with more discretion, was running along the slope to the left, while "Dave McCoy" was staggering back, trying to clear his eyes of blood and moisture born of those swift strokes.

The gentleman whose warning shouts had so suddenly cast cold water over the culminating hopes of the crooked triad made a move to intercept the flight of the last-named rascal, but Dan Dunn called out:

"Let him went, pardner. He's got my receipt in full—in black an' red, too!—an' I don't reckon he wants any more truck with us, fer one while, anyhow. Let him went—an' shake fer luck!"

The gentleman hesitated, his face dark with angry doubts, which were not lessened by the vicious snarl of the baffled crook as he dodged past.

"It's you, Eric Alvord. I'll even up with you for this, some day!"

"Look out that I don't send you to Congress first, Kit Melady."

The tall crook hurled back a curse at this grimly facetious hint, which he only too readily interpreted as a threat to send him to the "pen" at Jefferson City; but if anything it rather quickened his flight from the scene of his discomfiture.

"Let the critter snap an' snarl, pardner," laughed the cowboy, as he met the gentleman, with outstretched hand. "I reckon it cuts him plenty deep to hev the bone snatched right out o' his teeth, jest as he was fancyin' he could tell the taste o' the marrer. It'd be 'most too much runnin' him in to sarve a term in the pen, wouldn't it, now?"

"He deserves it, a thousand times over," with a lingering glance after the vanishing rascal. "There isn't a smoother, more dangerous scoundrel in all Kansas City than that same Kit Melady."

"I thought he was Dave McCoy, a pore, afflicted cowboy, on his way home to his dyin' mammy, with his Brother Ben packed in a box," ejaculated Dan Dunn, with an exaggerated expression of bewildered innocence spreading over his fine face. "Anyway, that's what he told me down yander whar the stampede is on."

A cold, hard laugh broke from the lips of Eric Alvord as he said:

"The 'dead brother racket,' of course. That's his pet trick, and he is letter-perfect in the role, too! You're not the first fellow he's took in after that fashion, nor will you—"

For the first time their eyes fairly met, and Eric Alvord paused short in his speech, with doubt and growing recognition filling his honest brown eyes.

Dan Dunn apparently overlooked this, and his grasp grew warmer as he shook the lawyer's hands.

"I never saw the little joker handled neater, on my word. More than half the time I even believed it *was* the pure white article, and I do reckon if you hadn't chipped in just as you did, I'd have given the fellow all he asked—he acted so perfectly."

"Then you wasn't—you are—"

It was not often that Eric Alvord was taken at a loss, but he certainly appeared to be on this occasion. He stared bewilderedly into the face of the cowboy as he mechanically responded to his ardent hand-clasp. His words were purely mechanical, and he left his questions unfinished. Surely those who had seen him in the heat of a legal encounter with sharp wits and sharper tongues, never would have recognized the rising young lawyer now!

Dan Dunn actually appeared to enjoy this mental obfuscation, for he laughed softly, merrily in Alvord's face as he released his hands.

"Play I be, pardner, ef you raally know jest what ye mean; fer I'm jiggered ef I kin make it out! Anyway," with a quick change of tone

and manner, as he cast a sharp glance in the direction of the bottom, where was visible a figure in gray, rapidly gesticulating as it advanced toward the rough rock wall, "I reckon we'd jest as well skin out o' this, ef we don't want to git run in fer doin' nothin'. Thar's a bobby makin' heap o' motions down yender, an' I reckon meb-be he wants to know fer why we've bin playin' circus up this way!"

"Let him come; I'll make it all right with him," said Alvord, rallying. "But you're not going away without your wealth?" nodding to where the money-belt still lay on the ground.

"Sense you mention it, meb-be I mought as well fetch her 'long," coolly responded the cowboy, picking up the belt and slipping it deftly into place as he added: "Mebbe it'll come into play ag'in. They *do* say this camp is the *durnedest* place fer crooks an' confidence-men! An' so them three critters was that sort? Waal, now, that gits me—bad!"

As he spoke, Dan Dunn was moving away from the spot where he had so narrowly escaped being fleeced by Kit Melady and his partners in crime, Eric Alvord bearing him company and narrowly watching his face all the time.

"The most dangerous gang in all this region! They would have skinned you of every dollar, and then—more than likely!—have sent you end-long over the rocks, as the easiest and shortest method of getting rid of you!"

"You know the p'izen critters, then?"

"And they know me," with grim earnestness. "I put part of their gang behind the bars, and Kit himself only escaped with the skin of his teeth. I told him then I'd see him in stripes, before many days, and if you hadn't signaled to let him go, this would have given me the chance to keep my word!"

"Mebbe I wanted to use him as a sort o' decoy. Mebbe I needed him to run down heap bigger game," suggested the cowboy.

Eric Alvord sharply faced the speaker, gazing keenly into his face as though striving hard to place him, but still with an annoying lack of success. Yet he could have taken oath this was no stranger—that he had met him before, under an entirely different guise.

"Who and what are you?" he demanded, with a frown of mingled perplexity and annoyance. "I've seen you before to-day. And you wasn't a cowboy, either!"

A swift glance around convinced Dan Dunn that they were beyond observation, and then a sudden and complete change came over him. Once more he caught the young lawyer's hands, pressing them warmly, saying:

"It's a good make-up, if it fools those keen eyes, Alvord. You're right; we have met before. If we hadn't I reckon I'd be little better than a pile of white bones, by this! You remember the Bald Knobs?"

A bright light flashed into the brown eyes of the lawyer, and that doubting look fled from his face as he exclaimed:

"Then I was not wholly mistaken! It is you—"

"Dan Dunn, if it pleases you, me lud," interposed the pretended cowboy, one finger deftly tapping the lawyer's startled lips. "Just consider that old name an *alias*, and that I'm now under my rightful title of Dan Dunn, fresh from the wild and woolly West, where bald-faced shirts and long-horn collars are unknown and unsighed-for?"

"You're on a hot trail, then?"

"I don't mind admitting as much, in strict confidence," with a guarded lowering of his voice as they slowly moved on. "I thought I had struck a lead when those fellows picked me up for a lamb, down yonder, and I was waiting for the right color to show itself, when you cut in to upset their apple-cart."

"Then you're after Kit Melady and his gang? Maybe I can give you a few pointers in that direction."

Dan Dunn flashed a keen glance into the young lawyer's face, as though to reassure himself.

It was a strong, if not a strictly handsome face he saw, just then.

Eric Alvord, though a comparatively young man—he could hardly have passed his first quarter of a century—had already made his mark in the city of his recent adoption, as a lawyer. Though he came to Kansas City, unknown and unheralded, there was something about him that quickly won confidence and trust, even from the old and skeptical.

There was something better than mere regularity of feature in that face; true manhood, rugged honesty, native chivalry. And the face was well matched by his figure; broad-shouldered, strong, yet active, with muscular limbs and small extremities.

Dan Dunn seemed satisfied, brief though that glance was, and he spoke out quickly:

"I never heard of the genial Kit before I struck town, though I've looked a little into his qualities since. Not because I wanted *him*, exactly, but— Do you know anything about an old fellow called 'Brocky' Sam, from his being deeply pitted with small-pox?"

The question remained unanswered, for, just then, there came to the couple a frantic clattering of iron-shod hoofs, mingling with the rattle

of wheels and excited shouts, growing more and more distinct with the passage of each moment.

"A runaway—look!" cried Alvord, as a dust-cloud rose over the crest. "God above! they'll go over the bluff, unless—"

The words changed to a cry of greater horror as he caught sight of a white, terrified face inside the carriage.

"It's Miss Meredith—it's Linnet—God pity us both!"

CHAPTER VI.

A SHOT FOR A LIFE.

DESPAIRINGLY came that cry from the whitened lips of the young lawyer as he recognized the maiden whose life hung by a mere thread, as it were.

As a flash of lightning makes a darkened landscape clear as day for an instant, just so he took in the entire situation; just so he saw that little short of a miracle could save that young life from utter extinction in another score of moments!

Though some little time had elapsed since he and Dan Dunn had turned away from the rock-ledge, their pace had been leisurely, and the ugly precipice was only a few hundred paces distant—less than half that far when measured in a direct line with the course those maddened animals were now taking.

As many of those frantic bounds would carry them over the verge, to be dashed into a shapeless mass on the rocks below. And even should the fear-blinded creatures realize their peril and try to check their swift progress, their utmost efforts could hardly avail after having once struck that steep slope which ended at the escarpment.

All this the lawyer saw, and he saw, too, that the horses were dashing straight on to death with renewed speed, now that they had no longer to drag a heavy weight behind them.

Fortunately Dan Dunn had no such terrible fear and agony of heart to benumb his wits, and with a sharp cry he prepared for action.

"Look to the lady, pard! I'll tackle the horses!"

Only that, but it was enough to break the benumbing spell which appeared to have fallen upon the young lawyer. It set him into motion, and that was well, for a wasted second might easily make all the difference between life and death, just then.

Dan Dunn was as prompt to act as he was to plan, for he darted forward at right angles to the course of the maddened team. Fortunately he had only a few yards to cover, else even he would have been too late.

Straight on dashed the animals, blind to everything save the wild, unreasoning terrors which urged them on to death. They never swerved a hair's-breadth, even when Dan Dunn, with a sharp yell, leaped straight at their heads.

True to his aim, the active fellow caught one arm around the neck of the nearest horse, at the same time dashing his broad-brimmed hat violently into the face of the other animal, adding the full weight of his clinched fist to the novel blinder.

With panting snorts of fright, the creatures tried to stop, rearing erect with wildly pawing hoofs, swinging the cowboy clear of his feet and threatening to dash him to death beneath their weight as they came down again, driven on by the weight of the carriage.

It was an awful moment, but Dan Dunn had gained his primary object by even for an instant checking that mad pace, thus giving Eric Alvord an opportunity to accomplish his part of the rescue.

But the weight of a dozen men clinging to their heads could not have halted the insane creatures on that steep slope, and in such a short stretch of ground. And realizing this, still ignorant how Eric Alvord was working, Dan Dunn clung desperately with his left arm to the tossing head of the horse, dropping his hat to draw a short, heavy derringer from his bosom.

And, though death in an awful shape stared Dan Dunn in the face, he was still cool enough to take no chances.

Still steady-nerved enough to wait until he felt and saw his weapon fairly touching the head of the other horse before pulling trigger and sending an ounce of lead crashing through its brain!

A lightning shaft could not have produced death more suddenly, and with horribly shattered skull the animal plunged in a quivering heap to the ground. The shock tripped up its mate, and as it fell, with the heavy carriage, snapping short its pole, plunging upon and over it, the fall flung Dan Dunn from his death-grip, endlong through the air, direct for the now terribly high escarpment!

But, even as his form touched the ground, Dunn realized his double peril, as, with marvelous agility, he rolled over and over, to one side, just in time to escape being carried over the verge with the wreck!

Panting, gasping for breath, he lay for an instant with his head and shoulders actually projecting over the brink. And, as he lay thus, he could see the landau and the horses—one dead, the other wildly pawing the air, shrilly neigh-

ing out its death-cry—dashed to shapeless ruin on the rocks far below!

And, great as his own peril was—even while some malicious demon seemed to be slowly but surely pulling him over the dizzy depth—he caught himself shuddering with horror as he wondered whether that fair young woman was now forming part and parcel of that sickening pile below!

Then a wild chorus of cheers came to his ears and partially served to clear his dizzied brain. He divined the truth, and it seemed to lend him the strength necessary to tear himself away from that perilous position.

"He did it! He's saved the girl!" he gasped, as he staggered to his feet and dashed the dirt from his eyes.

Eric Alvord had indeed seconded Dan Dunn's efforts. Leaping straight at the landau, given time by that bold leap at the horses' heads, the young lawyer had actually sprung into the carriage as the animals reared, catching Linnet Meredith in his arms and leaping out again, just as the whole mass went plunging on down the steep slope!

He was flung at length on the hard ground, but, even as he fell, he contrived to turn and so receive the greatest shock with his powerful shoulders, while Linnet was not injured, beyond a general shaking-up. And he quickly rose to his feet, clasping the maiden to his panting bosom, unheeding his own bruises, with thoughts and fears only for her—for the one woman in all this wide world to him!

"My darling—Linnet—speak to me!" he gasped, gazing wild-eyed into that pale face, looking so much like death that his heart grew cold with a sickening fear that, after all, his aid had come too late to avail aught.

He pressed his quivering lips to her brow, to her cold, white lips. He called to her by most endearing names. For the instant he was fairly distracted by fear, mad with the anguish such as only a strong man can feel when he believes the being he loves more than all the world else is dying or dead in his arms.

But his torture was of short duration. There was a little shiver of the lithe form which he held so tightly to his bosom. There was a quivering of the blue-veined lids, and then those glorious eyes opened to rest upon his face. At first with that look of horror still visible; then changing to an expression of wonder, then to pure and holy love and trust.

"Eric—I am safe, now!"

The strong young man grew suddenly weak, staggering under the loved burden, his brain whirling dizzily, his heart filled almost to suffocation with joy! Alive—and more!

He knew that his love was fully reciprocated, though he had never dared to confess it to her—hardly dared whisper it to himself. True, the maiden was hardly conscious, just then, but, unless love was behind them, could she have uttered those words? Could they have expressed such perfect trust?

This was what Dan Dunn saw as he cleared his eyes from the dust which filled them in that brief but desperate struggle. And a low, soft laugh parted his lips as he read the truth.

"He's won more than her life, that's plain!" he muttered, as he felt of his tingling limbs to assure himself no bones were broken. "Too easily seen, with all that rabble coming up over the rise!" he added, starting forward and whispering hurriedly when near the young lawyer: "Ware hawks, pard! The crowd is comin', an' you don't want to—Hope you're feelin' all right, miss?"

A significant glance and quick grip on Eric Alvord's arm completed the friendly warning, for, as Linnet Meredith opened her eyes once more, Dan Dunn dared not finish in plain speech.

But he had said enough, and Alvord gently lowered the maiden until her feet touched the ground, though his strong arm still supported her. And that was natural enough to deceive the excited crowd which came flocking to the spot, panting from their hot chase, too highly wrought up to be at all critical.

Dan Dunn played his part admirably, answering questions with ready glibness, giving the young couple time in which to regain their self-control in a goodly measure.

First among the crowd came the doughty policeman who alone had dared make any resolute effort at stopping the runaway team, and to him, as to one in authority, Dan Dunn briefly detailed how the rescue had been effected, generously giving all the credit to Eric Alvord.

Among the earliest on the scene was Nicol Faulkner riding the same animal that had contributed so much to the accident. He was pale as a ghost, his eyes wildly glowing with strong anxiety which quickly subsided as he caught sight of Linnet Meredith, seemingly unharmed.

Without recognizing the man who had lent her needed support, he flung himself from the saddle to rush to her side, mingling apologies with earnest hopes that she had come to no harm through the unfortunate event.

Dan Dunn whistled softly, barely above his breath, as he drew a little to one side, a hand caressing his mustaches as he watched.

"That's the ticket, eh?" he murmured, thoughtfully. "Unless my fine gentleman is

playing a game of bluff, Alvord will find an ugly snag in his channel!"

For the most part, the curious crowd were gathered at the verge of the precipice, staring down at the wreck below, or else were slowly and cautiously making their way down the rocks for a closer view. Only a few paused to stare at the maiden. Still fewer spoke to her as though they were friends or acquaintances.

By this time Eric Alvord, assured that the maiden had come to no particular harm, thanks to his adroitness in falling underneath, had assisted her to a seat on his doubled-up coat, silently fanning her with his hat, coldly ignoring the fussiness of Nicol Faulkner over her, as well as his thinly disguised hatred to himself. After those few words which had come so sweetly to his ears he could well afford this.

And Linnet Meredith, while perfectly polite, seemed desirous of avoiding the officious attentions thus effusively displayed, until even the handsome broker could no longer mistake her meaning.

He drew back, offering a liberal reward to the man who should first bring a carriage to the spot, then hastened to meet a stained and sorely dilapidated-looking figure which just then came hobbling over the rise.

"She is safe, dear Mr. Meredith," he cried, grasping the hands of the nabob with fervor. "She is not injured in the least, she tells me, though still weak and shaken by the excitement. I have sent for a carriage, which—"

"Curse the carriage!" blurted out the capitalist, rudely tearing his hands free and hobbling forward. "Curse everything—but my little Linnet!"

His daughter heard and saw him, and springing to her feet, ran to meet him, thus giving the best proof of her complete escape from injury. She was caught to the breast of her parent, whose tears of joy dampened her fair face as he murmured his thanks for her safety.

Never before had the cold, austere, dignified nabob shown himself so thoroughly natural as now. Never before had he been known to shed a tear.

Dan Dunn seemed deeply interested in the scene, after his own peculiar fashion. His keen gray eyes roved swiftly from face to face, and after Nicol Faulkner, with a dainty handkerchief, wiped the dirt and blood from the nabob's face, the pretended cowboy seemed intensely interested.

"Found at last!" he muttered, between his tight-clinched teeth.

CHAPTER VII.

ODDS AGAINST THE KNAVE.

DAN DUNN seemed on the point of starting forward. His hands closed tightly, his athletic figure shivered perceptibly. But only for a single breath. Then he was once more the cool, keen, critical observer whose bright eyes permitted nothing to escape them.

"Enough racket for one time, I reckon," he muttered. "Time enough—time enough and to spare!"

Nicol Faulkner kept close to Stuart Meredith and his daughter, seemingly bent on hindering any further intercourse between the latter and the young lawyer.

Eric Alvord took up his coat and put it on, soiled and torn from its violent usage, mechanically brushing his dented hat as he gazed after the maiden.

That first wild transport was fading away, and already it seemed but part of a dream. The girl had so completely forgotten him. Surely he had misunderstood her words!

Meredith having satisfied himself that no real harm had come to his daughter, began to feel the natural effects of his own shock and excitement. His thin face grew paler than ever, and Linnet gave a little cry of affright as she felt him tremble and stagger under her light weight.

Quick to make the most of his opportunity, Faulkner lent the half-fainting nabob a strong arm, gently supporting him to a seat on a little grass-covered knoll hard by, fanning him with his hat while hurriedly directing those about to fall back.

"If you want to do anything, get some water—or good brandy!" he cried, with a frown. "Don't crowd in and shut off all air!"

Meredith pushed his arm away with an impatient gesture.

"I'm not ill, sir—I'm never ill! Where is the carriage? I thought you said the carriage was all right, Mr. Faulkner?"

Linnet gave a little sobbing cry, clinging tightly to her parent. Those words brought it all back so plainly! She once more saw the maddened horses plunging blindly to a frightful death on the rocks!

Perhaps it was this convulsive clasp that aided, but certain it is that the nabob recovered almost as rapidly from that faint spell as it had overtaken him. He cast his eyes about in quest of the carriage, and seeing nothing of it on the slope, divined the truth at once.

"Over the rocks!"

"Never mind them, papa," murmured Linnet, half hysterically. "You are safe—and all the while I was seeing your cold and mangled—"

She could not complete the sentence, and by the time Stuart Meredith succeeded in quieting her sobs, his own weakness was a thing of the past.

Nicol Faulkner caught sight of the vehicle he had ordered, and thinking only of removing Linnet from the spot before she could fully realize how much she owed Eric Alvord, he hurried off to give his directions to the driver.

The Nabob of Quality Hill rose to his feet, attracted by the line of curiosity-seekers who were staring down at the frightful wreck on the rocks below, and with a cold frown on his thin face made his way to the spot, leaning over the brink until he could see the busy crowd far below.

"It's a shame—an' infernal shame!" his harsh voice broke out as he saw the wrecked landau being tossed aside, bit by bit, from over the crushed carcasses, by the men below. "Why couldn't somebody save them? Where were the police? Asleep or drunk, as usual?"

Dan Dunn had pressed a little closer to the nabob as he approached the bluffs, but at this he drew back again, shrugging his shoulders significantly as he muttered:

"I reckon the old codger would have mehung, drawn and quartered, if he only suspected how I shot one of his pet animals! Ugh! it makes me tired all over!"

Again his keen eyes were making notes, and he saw Faulkner leave the newly arrived vehicle to hasten to the side of Miss Meredith, just as though he feared the young lawyer would dare to draw near for the purpose of having her thanks completed.

"He ain't throwing any chances over his shoulder to-day," grimly muttered the pseudo cowboy. "He's bound to make the trail as rocky for pard as he can—that's too plain."

His gaze passed on to where Alvord stood silently listening to an elderly man who seemed to be congratulating him on his daring and adroit rescue. However pleasant such words might have been, under other circumstances, just now the young lawyer looked gloomy enough. He saw how attentive the young broker was, and how quietly Linnet accepted his gentle care in the absence of her father. And with each passing moment his doubts and fears grew greater.

The carriage drew up close to the little knoll occupied by the maiden, who silently permitted Faulkner to assist her inside. She moved like one in a dream it seemed to the closely observant "cowboy," but a frown contracted his brows as he glanced toward his friend. Surely she would not drive away without even a glance in that direction.

With native sympathy aroused, Dan moved toward Alvord, almost brushing shoulders with Faulkner as that worthy hastened to inform the nabob that all was in readiness for his departure. A keen, peculiar look followed the broker, but he felt it not. If he had, would he have been so nearly at ease?

Without fully exposing his anxiety to get away from the scene, Faulkner managed to hurry the nabob from the bluff to the carriage, officially aiding the old man to enter, then following after himself and calling out to the driver:

"To Belle View, Quality Hill, my man. And drive carefully, mind!"

The man silently touched his hat, and was closing the door when Linnet, with a faint cry, seemed to break the spell which had possessed her brain as well as body. A warm flush leaped into her pale cheeks as her lustrous eyes swept around, and then, before her companions could divine her purpose, she pushed the partly-closed door open, sprang to the ground and tripped hastily to where Eric was standing alone.

"Eric—Mr. Alvord!" and taking his hand between both of hers, tears in her eyes, she met his glad, grateful look. "I owe you a life—I must thank you—but not now, not here, with—"

Her voice failed her, with a little shiver, as she partly turned her eyes toward the carriage, where the white, handsome face of Nicol Faulkner was lit up by an angry scowl.

"There is no need—I did nothing worth—"

"Only saved my life!" with a hysterical laugh. "Is that nothing in your eyes, Eric? But not now—I beg you will call at the house this evening—I will be alone, and—"

"Linnet—child, we are waiting!" came the cold, harsh tones of her father.

"Promise!" she murmured, moving away, but with eyes still fixed on his glad, flushed face.

"I will—most gladly, Miss Meredith!" was his hurried response, all his recent doubts and fears forever brushed aside by her actions and her words, to say nothing of the look which kept them company.

Nicol Faulkner had alighted from the carriage, forcing a smile, but Linnet gave his proffered assistance no notice, springing into the seat beside her father and at once drawing her veil over her face.

"The whole three together: king, queen and jack!" laughed Dan Dunn, as he reached the side of his friend, watching the young broker enter and slam the door to after himself. "But

I'm betting long odds against the knave ever getting there!"

If Eric Alvord heard, he gave no heed, watching in silence until the carriage had driven away, catching his breath sharply as there came a little flutter of white as a parting signal from the woman of his heart!

"The white flag of surrender, dear boy!" laughed Dunn, softly, as he slipped a hand through the arm of the young lawyer. "No use in my offering even long odds on this little hand, for the game is already decided—and I wouldn't change it if I could! Good luck be yours!"

"You think—that is—" stammered the lawyer, flushing hotly under that quizzical yet kindly look. "You never gave them a chance to thank you for— Heaven forever bless you, Dan!" his tones breaking, his eyes growing dim as he grasped the hand of the "cowboy" between his own, pressing it convulsively. "Only for you—I dare not think of what might have been!"

"Then don't be foolish enough to try, pardner," laughing afresh, but with an undercurrent of strong feeling through all. "You saved my life down Bald-Knob-way, and if I've served you in this, just brush 'em both out together and call it even. As for thanks from that party," with a shrug of his broad shoulders, and a twist of his eyes in the direction where the carriage was just vanishing from their sight, "I'm not a bit hungry!"

Alvord seemed a little ill at ease. Though he himself had felt the need of a partial apology, he could not bear easily even an implied slight where the woman he loved was concerned.

"It was all so sudden. And she was so badly frightened. And—"

"Maybe I'm of her mind, too, pard. Maybe I kept shady just for that reason. I'd a heap rather be thanked or do my thanksgiving alone than in a crowd. Maybe the little lady is of my own mind in this—eh, pard?"

Eric Alvord made no response in words, but their eyes met, even as did their hands, and he sure their friendship was not lessened thereby.

By this time the crowd had thinned out until only one or two men besides the friends were on the wheel and hoof-scarred slope, the majority of them having gone down the bluff to inspect the ruin below.

"We're not exactly in company trim, pard," laughed Dan, as he cast a glance around them. "I'm dusty as though just off a day's round-up, while you—well, I'd hate to try to pawn that coat of yours for a ten-cent drink!"

"We'd best go down to the bottom, as the shortest way home. We'll find plenty of rigs there, and once at my office we can rig out fresh."

"You know the lay of the ground best, pard," nodded Dan, briskly. "It isn't often I fancy the idea of going slow, but we'll try it, just for a change anyway!"

In company the friends made their way down the bluffs, taking the trail up which Kit Melady—as "Dave McCoy," the sorely-afflicted cowboy—had guided his intended victim for plucking, if no worse. It was easier to descend than to scale, and a few minutes later found the twain safely on the level, looking toward the little crowd which was gathered about the mangled horses, moved by that indescribable curiosity which attracts human beings as honey draws flies.

"I really don't mind," nodded Dan Dunn, as their eyes met. "I lost my pet derringer, somehow, and maybe it went over the rocks with the team. I'd like to find it, if only for old-time's sake, though I reckon the chance is mighty slender."

They picked their way along the base of the bluff, soon drawing near to the crowd gathered about the ugly sight. But, neither of them had eyes or thoughts for this, just then, for simultaneously they made a curious discovery.

Hovering about the edge of the crowd was Kit Melady, Don Fisher, and the squat Irishman, Darby Devine.

"Say a word, and I'll have them run in for—" began Alvord, but Dan Dunn was not listening to his words.

He strode silently forward, tapping the taller crook on his arm as he blandly uttered:

"Say, pardner, ain't ye skeered ye'll miss that train? Fu'st ye know, brother Ben'll come waltzing 'long with that box on his back, to know what's keepin' ye so mighty long!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"CROWD YOUR GAME, PARDNER!"

KIT MELADY shrunk beneath that light tap, as only a professional criminal will or can shrink at a touch, and a sickly pallor came into his bruised face as he recognized that handsome, smiling countenance.

His right hand clinched, his arm stiffened by his side as though to strike hard and sure; but if such was his first impulse, it was short-lived and quickly banished. At that mocking speech he turned and slunk hastily away, accompanied by his two partners in crime, casting fearful looks over their shoulders, plainly expecting to be stopped short by an officer of the law.

But Dan Dunn had no such intention. He

laughed softly as he watched them for a brief space, then turned to meet the young lawyer.

"Dollars to cents Kitsy was hunting a fat pocket to squeeze, to get even for his disappointment up the rocks, yonder! Though, to do him simple justice, he's usually a notch above that; he quit pocket-picking as a trade when his whiskers began to sprout."

"Do you mean to let them go scot-free?"

"I don't reckon Kitsy would call it that," with another laugh as he locked arms with the disgusted lawyer, turning toward the depot as the shortest method of procuring a rig. "Two prettier eyes I never saw on mortal man. I'm downright proud of my skill as an artist, and if all else fails, I'll hang out my shingle to the breezes as a painter of the human face divine."

"Unless he gets in his work first," significantly. "Kit trams with a mighty tough gang, and he's no angel himself. All I'm afraid of is that he'll play to get even, and—"

"Lose again, for his pains," lightly interposed Dan Dunn, making a sign that caused a closed hack to leave its station in line.

By this time they were well in the edge of the human whirlpool which encircled the vast buildings, and the matter was wisely dropped for the time being. They entered the hack, and Alvord directed the driver to his office, near the junction of Main and Delaware.

Though the windows were lowered on both sides, the noise made by the hack over the rails and stones, prevented anything like easy conversation, and while the horses were slowly toiling up the hill, both men maintained silence.

It was easy enough to guess on what subject the young lawyer was pondering, if only for the glad, soft light that glowed in his brown eyes and the smile that played about his firm lips. But the face of Dan Dunn was not nearly so readily interpreted.

He was no longer the bewildered, wondering, awe-stricken cowboy, dazed by the roar of the multitude about him. Neither was he the smiling, careless, reckless man of the world he had showed himself since the unmasking of Kit Melady and his fellows.

His face was cold and stern, his strong jaws clinched until the regular contour of the face was destroyed, while a hard, metallic glow lent a peculiar, reddish tinge to his gray eyes. A wise man, seeing him in that guise, would never have selected him for an enemy.

Up the hill, over the rise, down the slope and into the busy, crowded Main street rolled the hack. Past the outgrown market-house, to follow the curve known as "Goose-neck," then up the gentle grade leading to where the two big streets come together at a sharp angle, forming what is called "The Junction." And a few moments later the hack drew to the curb in front of a huge structure liberally plastered over with real-estate signs and professional shingles.

The two friends alighted, paid the driver, and then, Eric Alvord leading the way, passed up to the little room which the young lawyer called his office.

Small and scantily furnished though this was—apart from the really fine and extensive law library—Eric Alvord paid a modest fortune for it by way of rent.

A few minutes' use of the little closet containing hot and cold water-pipes, with other toilet facilities, sufficed to work a surprising change in the personal appearance of both; but Dan laughingly refused the change of clothes which the lawyer offered him.

"I wouldn't know my own self in 'em, pard," he declared, dropping into the vernacular with an ease that proved how completely he had learned his lesson. "A bald-faced shirt an' long-horn collar fits you like a second pelt, but me—they'd be a wild stampede in the trails o' this blessed camp when I showed up, fu'st off!"

Eric gazed perplexedly into that smiling face for a few moments, then gave over his efforts, dropping into a chair, saying:

"What am I to call you, friend? What part are you playing? For, admirably as you act the part, I know you're no more a cowboy than I am one myself!"

"When I wear this rig, I'm a thoroughbred, right from the trail, an' don't you let it slip the mem'ry of ye, nuther, pard!" advised Dan Dunn. "Jest how long that'll be, 'pends on circumstances which I'm not makin', though I may be tryin' to steer 'em my own way. Ef you think you can't look at it in that light, why, the town's plenty big fer all two both on us, 'thout either trompin' onto the toes o' t'other as we takes our exercise. An' so—"

"That's enough, pard!" cried Alvord, as Dunn rose to his feet, his tones uncertain, his eyes growing moist. "Have it your own way. After what you've done this day—after saving the life of the one—of Miss Meredith—"

Dan laughed merrily, dropping into the seat he had momentarily deserted, the picture of amusement as he interposed:

"Save your breath, pard! I ain't goin' to jump the trail, jist yit. I was only seein' ef that flop-'em-over o' mine back yender hed knocked my tongue out o' gear. Ef it fools you, why, I ain't oneasy."

With a sigh of resignation the young lawyer

dropped back in his seat, realizing how useless it was for him to fly in the face of this peculiar fellow's wishes.

"Not to change the subject too hasty, pard, what sort o' gang was that I jumped from the bresh down yen' way, anyhow?"

Alvord showed that he had learned his lesson well, or else that he had forgotten the half-admission Dan Dunn had made not an hour earlier in the day, for he readily made reply:

"One of the hardest gangs of confidence-men with whi h this city is cursed. Not two months ago I had the pleasure of sending half the gang to the pen for robbing and then breaking the head of an old man from the country. Kit Melady was in it, of course, but I couldn't get proof enough to send him over the road. I understand he has sworn to pay me out for what I did, but that don't spoil my slumbers."

"You know the hull gang, then? Ever see or hear tell o' a spotted critter called Brocky Sam?"

Alvord shook his head negatively and a brief shadow fell over the face of the questioner; but he quickly rallied over the disappointment.

"He's a slippery critter, but I'll putt the iron to him yit! An' that settles so much! As fer Kitsy an' his whelps I hed a notion they run in his herd, an' that mebbe Samivel would turn up to help do the feather-pullin'—see?"

"You took terribly long chances!" with an involuntary shiver at the thought of what might well have followed only for the lucky chance which led him to that point on the bluffs. "Not only did you risk your gold—"

Dan Dunn smiled.

"You'd orter see'd tha'r eyes bulge out an' snap an' glisten when they ketched sight o' them yaller boys. I could 'a' knocked 'em off with a stick, an' never even breshed the nose o' any one o' the crowd. But even ef I hed 'a' lost it all I reckon thar'd 'a' bin a heap more cusses then grins at the 'vision atween Kitsy an' his pards! Fer why—I don't mind tellin' you, ef you be a law-sharp, pard—every blessed coin in the bunch is counterfeit!"

"A dangerous article to carry around with you, these times, Dunn!"

"Darby Devine would swear the same thing I'm bettin' big money!" laughed the queer fellow in response, but then abruptly changing the subject, he asked: "Who was the little lady, pard?"

Eric flushed, but hesitated only an instant.

"Miss Meredith, only daughter of Stuart Meredith, one of our rich capitalists. Indeed, people here call him the Nabob of Quality Hill."

"He looked like he mought own all the world an' hev a mortgage on three-thirds o' the heavens; but, I'll take it all back ef he's your cluss friend, pard."

Eric forced a laugh, but it was far from being the echo of either mirth or lightheartedness.

"I wish he was my friend. As a young and ambitious lawyer— Well, such rich friends are mighty handy things to have on draught!"

"Not your friend? Then I say it all over ag'in," nodded Dan Dunn, emphatically. "Did you hear him come nigh cussin' us fer not savin' his blessed critters an' the kerridge?"

"He was so excited he hardly knew what words passed his lips."

"Ef they wasn't inside, he couldn't spit 'em out o' his mouth. But I ain't grumblin' at that. I reckon it's his natur' to be that-a-way, but I do hope the little lady don't take after her pap—I do so!"

"She is an angel!" hastily began Eric, only to stop short with a hot flush as he caught that quizzical light in his friend's gray eyes.

"Never mind me, pard," encouragingly. "Finish paintin' the pictur', an' don't fergit the wings. But—ef it ain't shootin' too nigh the funny-bone—ain't you jest a leetle gone in that quarter, pard?"

There was no immediate response. The young lawyer shifted uneasily on his chair. Naturally proud and reserved, it was no easy matter to make confession even to this man, who had done him such an immense service, and whom he had other reasons for believing a good and true friend.

"It's none o' my business, o' course, pard," frankly added the cowboy—for lack of a more distinctive title—with a grave, earnest smile lighting up his frank countenance. "Nur it ain't my way to crowd anybody I like into a tight corner; but somehow I feel it driv' into me to give you jest a word o' good advice."

"My two eyes wasn't so chucked up with dirt, back yender, that I couldn't see how all broke up you felt when you reckoned the little lady hed skinned the divide. An' that made me watch her face a heap sight clusser than I ginally do a woman's face, when I hain't got some big reason fer it. An' I see—shell I whisper it, pard?"

There came a tinge of roguery through his earnest gravity which served to deepen the blush on Eric Alvord's face, but it served its purpose even better than Dan Dunn dared hope or expect. That painful reserve was brushed aside, and with their hands clasped, Eric Alvord confessed a portion of his passionate love for Linnet Meredith.

Silently, sympathetically Dan Dunn listened, nodding at times, smiling encouragement when the tongue of the lover faltered, and when he came to a pause—through lack of breath, rather than because he had fully unbosomed himself—the cowboy spoke up briskly:

"I kin boil it down to jest one short sentence, pard, an' here she be. *Crowd your game, pardner!*"

"I don't think I fully understand your meaning, Dunn?"

"Nat'ally enough, too!" laughed the cowboy.

"You hed thoughts an' eyes only fer the little lady, an' it ain't me that's findin' fault with you fer bein' built that way, mind ye, lad. But I hed one eye fer you, an' 'nother fer the crowd. I see a feller—the one as got the kerridge, ye 'member? I see him, an' I see that he didn't like it fer a cent the way you held the lady. I see that his mind was set the same way as yours; an' ef I hain't fergot how to read faces, he'll stop at nothin' short o' bloody murder—ef he does at that—to freeze you out in that quarter. An' so—I say it ag'in, an' mark each letter in great big print—*crowd your game, pardner!* I hear the little lady ax you would you call this evenin' to see her. Go thar by the highest road. Go thar to win. An' ef you come back 'thout puttin' a big black spider in Nicol Faulkner's dump-lin', I'll disown ye!" he emphatically concluded, bring his hand down with a sharp report.

CHAPTER IX.

A PHILOSOPHIC SPORT.

AMID other feelings, Eric Alvord experienced one of surprise, for this earnest friend of his must surely know more of the rich young broker than he had so far admitted, to speak so positively about his evil nature?

"You know him, then?" the lawyer ejaculated, allowing his astonishment to get the better of him for a moment. "I thought you never saw Nicol Faulkner before this day?"

At his first word, Dan drew back in his seat, and it was almost as though he had slipped a mask from his face, so sudden and complete was the alteration in his manner and looks. The features were the same, of course, but that hard, deadly earnestness was gone, leaving in its place that light, half-mocking air which the pretended cowboy had worn during the earlier part of their interview.

"Is that so?" with arching eyebrows. "I've see'd him nigh onto two times, I'm pritty nigh sure, unless he's got a twin brother floatin' round loose in the atmosphere; which don't seem noways likely. Fer the molds is gin'ally bu'sted wide open in the makin' of sech p'izen critters as he is—yes, sir!"

"But if you don't know him, how—"

"By the two eyes o' him, an' through the two eyes o' me," with an emphatic nod. "Didn't I see it into him when he never reckoned anybody pe'tick'lar was watchin' him fer the puppose o' takin' notes? Didn't I read it in the face o' him when he come up an' ketched you hug—s'portin' the little lady from collapsin' all in a heap? 'Deed I did, pardner, an' that is jest why I told ye to crowd your game, an' make sure o' the pot—beggin' pardon o' the little angel fer callin' her by such a name!"

Dan actually seemed abashed by the professional slip of the tongue, and drew back, slyly glancing into the face of his friend to see how it was received.

But if Alvord noticed, he made no remark. His brows were contracted, his face pale, his eyes filled with an uneasy, troubled light. What he had heard was sorely perplexing him, and he knew not what to say or to do, at first.

"Ef you don't bet, you can't win, pardner!" suggested Dunn, after a brief silence, during which he seemed to be trying to thoroughly read this friend of his.

Eric gave a start, and the quick flush which spread over his pallor told how shrewdly the cowboy had hit his secret thoughts.

"If I thought—if I dared hope—"

"Why wouldn't ye, pard? A man's a man, an' you're pritty nigh as wholesome as they make 'em nowadays, ef it is me that says it to yer face. A woman's a woman, an' who'd hev 'em made different? Nobody but a blamed fool! But that don't count. What I wanted to git at is somethin' like this:

"A man ain't half a man ef he hain't got a woman to fill out his life fer him. Here an' thar you'll find a couple that don't begin to make smooth jints, but that's beca'se they went to market with all eyes shet tight an' tuck the fust lot that come to hand."

"Now heresits you. Over yender waits the little lady. Natur' shaped you each fer to fit 'tother, or I'm too blind to smell inyuns with my ears plugged tight. An' so—go in an' win afore any other galoot kin even make a bluff on a bob fail. Ain't that jest as easy?"

Despite himself, Alvord had to laugh, this queer friend of his was so innocently in earnest—there was such a perfectly satisfied smile on his honest face as he leaned back in his chair, with thumbs hidden under his armpits; everything settled according to Hoyle.

"If I only had a little of your confidence, Dunn!"

"You kin hev it all, an' never stop to say thank 'ee, pard."

"If I wasn't such a poor devil—if I had plenty of money—if I could show up title-deeds to a dozen or two lots in the heart of the city, even. But I'm only a young lawyer, living from hand to mouth, hardly sure of my ability to pay my rent as the month comes round."

"Wal, ef she's that sort o' critter, why—"

Dan broke off with a laugh as Alvord made an almost angry gesture. He coolly resumed:

"Ef she ain't—an' I knowed a face like that couldn't lie—what matter ef you hain't got one dollar to rub ag'inst another? Two kin starve jest as cheap as one, though I don't really reckon they's a mighty much danger o' that, even ef she was to ketch onto you," and his gray eyes roved critically around the shelves of calf-bound books. "Ef wu'st should come to wu'st, they's skins enough thar to make soup fer good six months. Mebbe they mought be more fattenin' diet, but with plenty o' love an' sweet breezes to fill up the corners it leaves, I reckon you could git along fer—that's hearty, pard."

Dunn smiled approvingly as Eric broke into a hearty laugh. His prime object was gained, and dropping his mock philosophical air, the self-styled cowboy spoke up briskly:

"What sort o' critter is the old man, anyway? Who is he? Whar's he from? What's he wu'th, an' how'd he git it? Whar's his weak p'int, ef he's got any? Fer, whether you like the idee or not, pard, I'm dead bent on fetchin' round a weddin'-party with you an'— Eh?"

Careless though he seemed, Dan Dunn cut himself short at this blunt allusion to the lady of his adoration. After all that had passed between them, this seemed a little tinged with mock modesty, but he put a more favorable interpretation upon it. Few men were capable of such ardent yet so reverent a love.

"Mr. Meredith is a Southerner born, I believe, though I might not find it such an easy matter to give you plain reasons for so thinking. Doubtless I could find it out, for certain, if necessary."

"Not on my account, pard," interposed Dan Dunn. "I wouldn't kick ef he was born in the land o' the moon. It ain't him you want to marry."

"It might almost as well be," with a faint smile. "He's a thorough gold-worshiper, and measures all men by their present or prospective richness. You saw how he scowled at me, and how he smiled on Faulkner? Right there you have the key to his character."

"Then young Nick is runnin' over with ding-bats?"

"He's reputed rich, but I was alluding to his prospects, rather. He is what they call 'on the inside'; he has a finger in every promising speculation, and Meredith turns over to him all the buying and selling which he don't care to meddle with himself."

"Makes him a kind o' pet, so to speak?"

Alvord nodded gloomily. The more he thought the matter over, the less hope he saw for the future, despite the decidedly encouraging manner of the woman he loved so ardently.

"Shouldn't wonder ef the old man hed kinder sot one eye onto him fer a son-in-law, nuther?" half inquired, half asserted Dan Dunn.

"It looks like it—worse luck!"

"Amen! ef you mean that kind o' luck fer Nick," laughed Dunn. "But the daddy don't hev nigh all the say-so these days, bless the Lord! An' ef I hain't gone clean blind in my old age, the little lady don't look through the same pa'r o' specs! How is it with her, pard?"

Alvord hesitated, flushing anew, but then softly uttered:

"I believe—I hope she likes me best."

"Waal, I should remark! You're too mighty bashful, pard, an' that's jest what's goin' to git away with your baggage, ef you don't brace up an' play your hand fer all it's wu'th—an' heap more, ef ye kin do a bit o' bluffin'! Why not? What ef you can't count down dollar fer dollar with the old gent? Ain't you a man? Ain't you clean white? Cain't you love a woman jest as hard as ef you was a Vanderbilt an' Jay Gould all two rolled up in one pelt?"

"Fer sure! An' ef it was you that was so rich, an' ef it was the little lady that hedn't a red cent to the back o' her, would you throw her over your shoulder to pick out a richer gal?"

"I wish she was poor—or that I was rich!" muttered Eric.

"Putt it still stronger, pard. Say that the little lady was poor; say that she hedn't a second dress to her back; say that her pap was a low-down rascal; try to 'magine him the wu'st o' mankind—a murderer an' a robber an' a cheat—a foul blot on the face o' the airth! Say this was all true, an' say you knowed she was pure an' innocent an' a woman true to the very core; would you throw her over your shoulder even then?" earnestly asked Dan, leaning forward, his eyes aglow, his face intensely earnest.

"I love her—I would love her still, though she sprung out of the very dregs of humanity! I love her for herself alone, Dunn!"

The cowboy sunk back in his chair, both hands slipping into his pockets as his long legs

were thrust out. All his intense earnestness seemed to fade away, and he spoke lightly:

"Then what's the matter with you, anyhow? Be you so much better than the little lady? If you'd do all this, why wouldn't she go half-way as fur? An' it's the little lady, mind ye, that you're wantin', not the old gent with his money-bags."

"But—if he commands her to—"

"Play we don't," interposed Dunn, with a passing frown. "Stick to the text, for it's growin' dark an' I'll lose my supper ef I don't git back to the tavern on time! Try to look at it from the outside, pard. I tell you I see in the two eyes o' her that she loves you, jest as hard as you dare love her! An' ef them two eyes don't lie, all you've got to do is to spunk up right brash an' ax her will she marry you! Ten to one, in big figures, that all the rest will come easy, pap or no pap, Nick or no Nick! But you want to crowd your game, as I said afore. Go in to win. It won't kill you—no human critter ever yit died o' pure delight, an' you ain't goin' fer to set the pattern! Git her say-so fu'st, an' then she'll help you manidge the old man—be sure!"

Dan rose from his chair, gripping the hand which Alvord extended, smiling as he added:

"You'll git thar, pard, ef you only try to think it. I see her two eyes, an' they wasn't lyin' then. Go in—an' call on me to-morrow, at my tavern, the Hotel Brunswick, they call it. By that time I'll git a good ready to 'gratulate you—an' the little lady, too, by gum! Durned ef I know which one'll git the best eend o' the barg'in!"

Alvord promised to act upon his advice, and to call as requested. He proposed bearing the cowboy company to the hotel, but Dunn refused.

"It'll take you from now to then fer to primp up—don't I know it, pard?" with a mischievous laugh as he passed the door. "I've bin thar my own self—bin thar big!"

They parted at the pave, with a warm, lingering hand-clasp, then Dan strode rapidly along the brilliantly-lighted street, seemingly at no loss as to the proper course, greenhorn though he claimed to be in that wonderful young city.

This was proved by his striking out from the busy street, taking a shorter course than by following the main artery, though this carried him into narrower, less brilliantly lighted streets.

Would he have taken this course had he even suspected the startling fact of his being followed? It was a fact, though Dunn gave no sign of even suspecting such a thing. Even as he parted with Eric Alvord, his trail was struck by more than one dark figure, and now they were creeping silently along through the densest shadows, keeping the athletic cowboy in sight through all his turnings.

By this "short cut," Dan was led through a bit of low-lying ground, where the streets were poorly lighted, and the alleys gloomy; but he seemed fully at home, and only slackened his pace when a woman suddenly appeared before him, brokenly panting:

"Oh, sir! if you have a heart for pity and mercy, save me from that terrible man! Save me—"

A sharp cry cut short her words, and she started back as though frightened afresh, half-turning as though to flee in haste.

Was it from that dark shape with uplifted hand, behind Dan Dunn?

CHAPTER X.

BROCKY SAM AND HIS MISSION.

THAT ride to the mansion of the Merediths, on Quality Hill, was anything but a delight to Nicol Faulkner, though no one would have suspected what a sea of ugly passions was surging beneath that polite, humble demeanor with which he tried to efface all disagreeable feelings which his share in that nearly fatal accident had given birth.

Linnet never spoke a word. Even when directly addressed she contented herself with a silent bow or shake of the head. And though Stuart Meredith spoke often enough, it was after anything but an agreeable fashion.

He seemed to divide the blame of the accident equally between the unknown rider of the bicycle and the young broker. And when Nicol tried to explain that unlucky slip of his horse, it only made matters worse:

"You should know better than to own such a clumsy brute, sir!" the nabob stiffly retorted. "Or, if you must own such, you ought to know better than come near other people to endanger their lives, sir!"

This is only a sample of what Faulkner was called upon to meekly endure during that ride, and brief though it was, as to distance, he never spent a more disagreeable quarter of an hour.

When Belle View was reached he assisted Linnet out of the hack and ventured a gentle pressure of her little hand as he muttered something about calling to inquire after her precious health; but, if the young lady heard, she certainly made no reply, hastening at once into the house. And Stuart Meredith hobbled after her without even bidding Faulkner good-evening.

Altogether, the broker felt that he had put in a most unprofitable day, and as he strode away bitter curses came through his clinched teeth.

"And that infernal shyster, too!" he grated viciously, his hands clinching as though he longed to feel the throat of his rival between his sinewy fingers. "He had to turn up just when he wasn't wanted!"

He stopped short at that, with a slight shiver. For the first time he realized that, only for the man whom he was cursing, all his golden hopes might have been destroyed—and the woman whom he vowed to make his wife lying a loathsome mass of mangled flesh!

"And he'll trade on it, too—unless I cut in before him!" he scowled, as he strode swiftly down the street.

But there was nothing of all this to be read in his face as, very early that evening, he ascended the marble steps leading to the front door of Meredith's mansion. And as the door swung silently open in answer to his ring, the soft flood of light from the chandelier in the wide hall fell on a gravely smiling face as he asked for Miss Meredith.

"As well as might be expected, sir," politely answered the tall servant in livery, bowing low, but making no sign of admitting the caller. "We hope Miss Meredith will be able to receive, to-morrow, but it is impossible, this evening, sir."

"Take my card, and say that I beg for just one moment's interview. I think Miss Meredith will see me," persisted Faulkner.

"Sorry, sir, but it would cost me my place," was the respectful but firm response. "My orders are very strict. Miss Meredith was to be disturbed on no account whatever, sir!"

For an instant it seemed as though Faulkner would force an entrance, but the mad idea was dispelled almost as soon as born. Without a word he turned and strode down the graveled way, his eyes aglow, his face hard and stern, his hands tight clinched.

"I told her I'd call. She heard me plain enough. Why didn't she then say that she didn't feel strong enough to receive?" he muttered, leaving the grounds. "Would she shut out that penniless shyster? If I thought—"

He bit his words short off, as he caught sight of a gentleman rapidly ascending the slope below, and, as he passed directly beneath a lamp, he caught his breath with a sharp hiss, for he recognized the very man he was cursing in his heart!

With a swift motion Faulkner pulled his hat over his eyes and turned up his collar, stooping his shoulders and assuming a gait as different as possible from his natural one. All this in a single breath, as it were, and before Alvord could possibly have detected his figure in that shade, much less recognize his identity.

In this fashion Nicol Faulkner passed the young lawyer unrecognized, and then, as soon as the man whom he instinctively recognized as a favored rival, had passed sufficiently far to prevent suspicion, the broker turned back, dogging his movements.

"He's going to call on her, curse him!" he grated between his teeth, the evil glow deepening in his dark eyes. "Did she make an appointment with the cur, when she jumped out and ran up to him, to-day? Will she receive him—Satan pity the shyster if she does!"

Even as that vicious threat passed his lips, Nicol Faulkner saw Eric Alvord turn from the pave into the spacious grounds, and hugging the terraced wall, he watched eagerly, breathlessly, to decide his fears.

He saw the young lawyer pass up the steps, and even fancied he could detect the musical jingle of the door-bell. He saw the door open as it had in his own case; then came a savage imprecation, for Eric entered the hall and the door closed silently behind him!

For fully half an hour Faulkner lingered near, watching the door, dimly visible owing to the subdued light that came through its stained-glass paneling; but the young lawyer did not reappear.

"That does settle it!" he grated, turning and striding rapidly away, heading down-town. "She *did* give him an appointment! She is just fool enough to fling herself at his head in gratitude for his saving her life to-day! Unless he's more an idiot than I think him, he'll make hay while the sun shines, and— But he'll never reap the harvest while my head's hot—never! I'll kill him, first!"

And as he passed under a gaslight, the face of the young broker fully bore out his savage threat. It was the face of a murderer!

By the shortest route, Faulkner struck the cable line, jumping aboard without taking the precaution to stop its swift motion, sinking into a seat, paying no attention to the nods of recognition which more than one of the passengers gave at his entrance. His features were still stern and dark, still betraying something of the hot rage and bitter revenge which boiled and bubbled in his busy brain.

He left the car in much the same reckless fashion with which he had boarded it, crossing the broad pave and running rapidly up a steep flight of stairs in one of the many huge buildings which afford office room for the legions of

real estate brokers who all seem to fatten on the marvelous "boom" with which Kansas City then was blessed. He paused before a door, through the transom above which fell a soft flood of light; then turning a knob, he entered, only to stop short with a harsh ejaculation as his gaze rested on a burly figure tipped back in an office-chair, feet crossed on a desk, and with a cloud of vile-smelling smoke hovering above his head.

"Who the devil—"

"Only one of his imps, boss!" came a hoarse response, as the intruder wheeled about in his chair to confront the broker, with a grin.

Broad shouldered, massive-chested, muscular beyond the generality of mankind, with broad face, deep red in hue and badly pitted with small-pox; with a shock of grizzled hair which had once been yellow; with small, deep-set eyes of gray, now in a setting of streaky red; roughly clad, with stained and rumpled linen; such was the man whom Nicol Faulkner confronted, at first with an angry scowl, then with a forced smile, but glittering eyes.

"You, is it, Brocky?" he exclaimed, with something almost cordial in his tones, as he closed the door behind him. "Where's my man?"

"Sent him out for more lush, boss," drawled the fellow, never offering to move from his seat, seemingly assured that his presence was heartily welcome, or else not caring anything about it. "You're too infernally stingy in your preparations for guests, or else you don't often have such a thirsty customer as myself! I emptied the locker in my first half-hour, and had to either send or go myself. So I sent. And told your steward to tell 'em to charge it!"

"That's all right, Sam," nodded Faulkner, seating himself, furtively scanning the strong, repulsive face before him. "Make yourself at home!"

"Which I'm mighty apt to do, boss!" with a coarse laugh. "What's all this I heard 'bout the nabob getting eternally smashed up to-day?"

"There's nothing in it—only a simple run-away. Nobody hurt but the team. I was there, so you can take my word for it."

"You, was it?" squinting through the smoke-cloud. "Seems to me I heard the name spelled different—more like that of young Alvord—Satan roast him for a meddler!"

"You don't love him any too well, Sam?" asked Faulkner.

"Why should I?" flinging the stump of his rank weed spitefully into the cuspidore. "Didn't he do his level best to break up as neat a little family as I ever gathered under Brocky's wing? Didn't he even send half of them over the road? Love him? Yes—asa hungry cat loves a fat mouse!"

"And I've heard he swears he'll finish the contract, too, Sam," the broker suggested, scanning that ugly face.

"If he lives long enough," grimly laughed Brocky Sam.

"You are not an angel, then, Samuel?"

"Where's my wings?" with a hard laugh as he twisted his neck to glance over his shoulders.

"And you're not greatly afraid of soiling those hands, Sam?"

"Not if I know where to find the right quality and quantity of soap to wash them afterwards," now gazing steadily in the pale face of his opposite, his deep-sunken eyes beginning to glow.

Faulkner shifted on his seat with visible uneasiness, but he managed to meet that stare unflinchingly. For fully one minute this endured, then Brocky Sam leaned forward, his hands supported by his knees as he bluntly demanded:

"What're you trying to get at, boss? You ain't often so mealy mouthed as all this comes to. You want a job done—then why in blue blazes don't you name it in plain words?"

"If I knew for sure I could trust you, Sam!"

"If you don't know, don't try," drawing back with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "You've made a botch, somehow, boss. You've either kicked all the fat in the fire, or else let some one else do it."

"There has been a hitch, but it was no fault of mine," sullenly. "That isn't the point just now, though. You want plain speech? All right. You shall have it. How much will you take to kill a man?"

Brocky Sam never changed a muscle, but stared reflectively into the pale face of the broker, for a few moments, before making answer. Then, in cool, business-like tones he responded:

"That depends a good deal on who the man is, what he is, and how easy he can be got at. I didn't even hear you mention his name, boss!"

"Will you do it? That's the main question!" persisted Faulkner. "Name your own figures. I'll never haggle. All I want is swift and sure work—no half-way measures!"

"Them things comes high, boss," was the easy drawl. "But I can furnish 'em, if you are willing to pay the price."

"Didn't I say I'd pay?" with sudden irritation in face and voice. "Name your own figures,

and I'll meet them without a murmur, I tell you. All I ask in return is that you do your share as smoothly!"

"When I know the class of work, I'll know better how to set my price, you understand," imperturbably retorted Brocky Sam, smiling.

"What if I was to point out Eric Alvord as the man?"

"Then I'd offer to do the job up brown for heap less money than I'd name for any other man in all K. C.," was the ready response.

Faulkner drew a long breath of relief. Evil-hearted though he was, this was no slight task to manage, but, now that his last doubts were dispelled, he spoke promptly enough:

"Then—I do mean Eric Alvord! Now name your figures!"

CHAPTER XI.

TO TEST HIS FORTUNE.

THE jealous-eyed young broker was not deceived. Where he himself had been denied, Eric Alvord won prompt admission, the servant bowing low and stepping aside to give him entrance, even before he could fairly shape the words which rose to his lips.

"At home—to you, sir!"

Eric flushed, for there was something in the looks and manner of the servant which told plainly as words that the story of his daring rescue had spread before him. And it was not easy for the carefully-trained fellow to keep from thanking the gentleman who had kept that house from being filled with mourning.

With a rapidity that gave him no time for "primping," as Dan Dunn laughingly called it, Eric found himself ushered into the second parlor, where the dim, soft lights indistinctly revealed the rising figure of fair Linnet Meredith.

As the door closed softly behind him, the maiden came forward, both hands outstretched, looking more than ever like an angel in that "dim, religious light," as Eric Alvord caught himself thinking.

"At last!" she murmured, her sweet tones full of poorly suppressed emotion. "I have been watching and waiting, until I almost began to fear you were never coming!"

Strong as the young lawyer was, he felt weak and dizzy in that moment. With both her hands clasping his, with that lovely face—more lovely than ever, in its paleness, he thought—looking half reproachfully into his misty eyes! With that gentle, flattering reproach on her lips—did she mean to drive him clear out of his senses?

"You are very kind to say that, Miss Meredith," he managed to stammer, wondering if he could master the wild temptation he felt to catch that lithe, graceful, soft-robed figure to his bosom, holding her as he had held her once that day, only after quite another fashion: with her own free consent!

"Would you have me play a part, Eric? Would you have me keep the whole truth forever hidden under the mask of cold ceremony? After all you have done this day? After saving my poor life, at the risk of your own?" almost passionately murmured the maiden.

"I did what I could, but that was only helping, after all," Alvord forced himself to utter with distinctness as they sought seats. "If it hadn't been for my companion—strong, quick, true to the core!—I would have been perfectly helpless so far as rescuing you was concerned, dear Miss Meredith."

In trying to push back his own strong emotion, the young lawyer spoke stiffly, even coldly, as it sounded. A quick flush shot into the pale face of the maiden, and her eyes drooped for an instant. Was this intended as a reproach? Had she been too forward?

Whether or no, such was her first interpretation, and from that instant Linnet Meredith was once more her usual self, cool, calm, graceful, polite as ever, but with that delicious warmth lacking in her manner.

"It was all so sudden, so terrible, so quickly over, that I only knew that you managed to snatch me from the carriage, just as it seemed on the point of going over that frightful bluff!"

With a little of her former passionate earnestness Linnet leaned forward and caught his hand between hers, adding hurriedly:

"I could not thank you then, with all those curious eyes upon us. I thought I could tell you how grateful, how deeply indebted to your noble daring I felt, if I could see you alone, and for that I asked you to call this evening. But now—I cannot find the right words!"

"Consider them said and properly acknowledged, dear Miss Meredith," was the laughing response. "By that course I'll be the gainer, for, really, nearly all the thanks are owing to my friend, Mr. Dunn."

"Who is he? Have I ever met him? Why did you not bring him with you this evening, since we owe him so much?"

"I think you are strangers," after a brief hesitation. "Only for his quick wit and prompt action I would have been too late to have done aught of service. I recognized you—I divined your peril—but my blood seemed to turn to ice within me, and I felt as though riveted to the spot, my horror was so intense!"

"Yet—you did save my life," murmured Linnet. "And now you refuse to let me thank you for the gift! Is it utterly valueless in your eyes?"

There was no immediate response. Eric felt a burning impulse urging him to show this soft-voiced maiden how precious that life was in his eyes. He felt that something of this temptation must be visible in his face, and yet Linnet did not shrink or start away! Was she so blind? Or—he dared not finish the alternative, even in his own mind!

"You asked me about my friend, Dan Dunn, Miss Meredith," he finally forced himself to utter. "I can tell you very little concerning him, save that I know him as a true, honest, faithful, sincere friend; a man, true to the core."

"You praise him very highly, Mr. Alvord." "No more highly than his merits deserve," was the quick response. "You asked me about him, and I have answered you, after a fashion. Now—I wish you would ask me about myself."

"I do ask you, then," with a short, forced laugh, her dark eyes opening a little wider. "And—meaning no slur to your friend—I feel a far greater interest in the last subject."

Eric made no note of her slightly forced playfulness. His head was bowed, his right hand nervously pinching his lips, a perceptible shiver agitating his muscular figure. Then, with a sudden backward toss of his head, he looked the maiden squarely in the face, speaking rapidly, earnestly:

"I do not know what or how much you may have learned of my past, Miss Meredith, but I do know that for months past I have been trying to find some plausible excuse for telling you what I know about my early years, before I came to this city."

"I will listen, gladly. You have won the right to ask a far greater favor than that, Mr. Alvord," gently murmured Linnet.

Was the man blind? Could he not see that he was wasting precious minutes in beating about the bush? Surely he ought to have rightly interpreted her words, her actions, her fleeting glances!

If so, he made no sign. His strong face was pale, and his muscular fingers plainly trembled as they closed and unclosed. There was an unnatural ring to his tones that she had never noticed before.

And it was with a vague premonition of coming evil that Linnet Meredith sunk back in her soft chair, to listen to his confession.

"You are kind—far too kind, I fear you will think, Miss Meredith, when you learn all I have to confess. And yet," his tones steadying a little, his brown eyes lifting to her pale face, framed against the velvet chair-back, "I could wish it were more! It might make the story easier to tell, or else—prevent its relation altogether!"

"If it is a painful subject, why not put it aside for this evening—if not forever?" softly asked Linnet, her cheeks flushing.

"Because I have something to say to which this brief life-history is a necessary preface," was the instant response. "And yet, it is hard. For instance: you called me Eric Alvord, but a little while ago. You believe that is my name, but I have no actual right to it; I cannot say that I have a right to any name!"

Linnet partly started from her seat, but with a quick motion the young lawyer checked her impulse.

"Let me explain, Miss Meredith, after my own fashion, please."

"I am wholly ignorant of the date or place of my birth. I never knew father, mother or less near kindred. I may have sprung from the very gutter out of which a dear old gentleman picked me when very young—scarcely more than an infant, in fact! For aught I can say to the contrary, my parents may have been the veriest dregs of society!"

"No other dare hint as much, after looking into your eyes, Eric Alvord!" impulsively exclaimed the maiden, her cheeks all aglow, her glorious eyes filled with a generous fire.

"Still, it may well be the truth, for all, Miss Meredith," with a faint smile as he bowed in acknowledgment. "And yet—like one in a dream, I often fancy I can recall different surroundings. It seems as though I had, in my earliest days, lived with honest, if not rich people. I can even trace the shadowy, phantom outlines of a fine house and extensive grounds! Yet—all that may be no more than a dream!"

"I have more faith than that! I believe it is a glimpse of the actual truth!" declared Linnet, emphatically.

"I fear your generous heart leads you astray," with another faint smile, his voice growing steadier, calmer, more matter-of-fact as he added: "For my benefactor—the kind old gentleman of whom I spoke, as having picked me up out of the gutter—told me he had spent both time and money very freely in striving to find out my antecedents, but wholly without success. He said that for years he had kept up his efforts to trace my past, but all in vain."

"Of course it was a severe shock to me when he told me all this, as he lay on what was too

soon to prove his death-bed, but I felt most his admission that I was not his actual son. I had been brought up as such. I loved him as a father, as he richly deserved. If his blood had flowed in my veins, I could not have been treated more kindly, loved more truly!"

"In less than a week, Mr. Alvord was in his grave, and I was alone in the world. I knew that his income died with him, but I cared naught for that. I knew that I had no right to the name I had borne since childhood, but even that gave me little trouble. I could only grieve for my dear benefactor—for my father! Even now I must call him that!"

There was a brief pause. When Linnet would have spoken, a motion of his hand checked the words that rose to her lips. Then he added:

"It was not until after I came here and settled down to business that I began to realize how truly unfortunate I had been; that I began to wish I had a name and birth to the record of which I could point without a blush. And as day followed day, this horrible blank troubled me more and more!"

"Shall I tell you why, Miss Meredith?"

"If you wish," was the response, but, low as it was, his ears caught the sounds and rightly interpreted them.

"It was because I began to realize what wonderful meaning there is in the one little word—love! Because, almost before I realized the truth, I fell in love with a young lady, proudest among the proud, of aristocratic birth, of great wealth, lovely as a dream, the most perfect of all her sex!"

There was no lack of warmth in his tones now. The pallor had faded out of his face, and his eyes were glowing as though backed by living fire. And though the maiden tried hard to keep her eyes unwavering, they trembled and sunk before his gaze.

She could not even pretend to doubt or misinterpret his meaning. In her heart she knew that this object of his great love was herself. And in her face she betrayed that knowledge, despite herself.

But, Eric seemed willfully blind to even this glad truth, and if anything he drew a little further away. He even put his hands behind him, as though the better to resist temptation.

"I was just so insanely foolish, Miss Meredith," he added, his voice growing more and more unsteady as he proceeded. "If I had realized the truth in time, I believe I would have had manhood enough to flee from danger. I did try to do so, but—God help me!—I could not tear myself away even though cold reason told me I could never hope to win the consent of her father, should heaven be so gracious to me as to give me her affection in return for my mad, foolish love!"

His voice broke off there, and he covered his face with his trembling hands. To start with a wild, breathless joy as a soft, warm touch caressed his fingers, and a low, sweet voice murmured:

"And that proud, aristocratic lady, Eric? Did you never think that she might be just as foolish—if you call true love folly?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE SAND-BAGGER'S DECOY.

As Dan Dunn entered the darkest portion of his way, the two men who had shadowed him from the time of his parting with Eric Alvord, stole on silent feet nearer and nearer to him, until they were only a short distance in his rear when that trembling woman so suddenly appealed to him for protection. And, as the detective came to a pause, in answer to her appeal, the two ruffians crept still closer, the leading one gripping tightly a terrible weapon—the silent, deadly sand-bag.

As though she saw this peril, the woman shrunk back with a sharp cry, half-turning as though to seek safety in flight, but, before she could do more, Dan Dunn sprang forward and caught her wrist, bringing her face close to his own.

Dim as the light was, it proved sufficient for his keen vision, and his voice rung out sternly:

"It is you, Shady Belle? What little game are you trying to play off on an old rounder like me? Am I your game, or did you make a mistake in the man, Belle?"

That abrupt stride of his, carried Dan just beyond reach of the ruffian, who was on the very point of striking, and saved his life, for the moment.

The woman shrunk back, still murmuring something which Dan Dunn failed to fully comprehend; then her demeanor suddenly changed. Instead of trying to escape, she flung her free arm about the neck of the menaced man, clinging to him desperately, crying in choking tones:

"Save me—don't let him kill!"

Even in that peculiar situation Dan Dunn was not to be taken wholly unawares. He caught the sound close behind him, and, slightly ducked his head as he sought to fling off the hampering woman and turn—but too late!

"That for you, bloodhound!" came a grating voice, as the sand-club fell with a sickening

sound upon his head, crushing him to the ground, almost carrying the treacherous woman with him as he fell.

With difficulty she saved herself, reeling back, bringing up against the blank wall.

"Give him another on my account, mate!" muttered the second man, viciously, as he came closer to the fallen detective.

The ruffian addressed stood with ready weapon, but Dan Dunn lay motionless as he fell, face downward, seemingly killed outright.

"He's got his fill, I reckon!" with a low, grating laugh as he bent over his victim. "Curse him! I only wish he had caught a glimpse of my face before he went down in a heap! I'd like him to know how I pay off my debts!"

"Not any in mine, thank'ee!" grinned his companion, neither of them paying the slightest attention to the woman who leaned against the wall, her face showing white against the dark background. "If I know the debt is paid, that's plenty for me; in addition to the dingbats!"

There was a moment's silence, during which Kit Melady—for he the taller villain was, with Don Fisher bearing him company in his vile plot for revenge and booty combined—felt of the body with practiced fingers. Then, with a short laugh, he muttered:

"It's all right, mate! I can feel the shape through his clothes! Lend a hand to drag him into the alley, and we'll soon finger the yellow-boys, after all!"

"That's biz!" nodded Don Fisher, grasping Dan Dunn by the limp right arm, rudely dragging him across the pave and into the denser shade of the alley, narrow and filthy, evidently running back only a short distance, never having been cut entirely through to the next street.

"Tell Belle to watch for cops."

Kit Melady was already turning toward the white-faced decoy, a dark scowl upon his own features as he growled out viciously:

"What the foul fiend's got into you, anyway? How did you come to make such an infernal botch of it, at first?"

"His face—it was like meeting a ghost!" panted the decoy, one hand nervously loosening the shawl at her throat as though it choked her. "I never thought of—of meeting him!"

Kit Melady caught her arm in a savage grip, bending until his face almost touched hers, dark suspicion in his eyes as they fairly scorched in their fiery intensity.

"Who is he? What do you know of him? When and where did you ever have dealings with that fellow, girl?"

With a desperate effort the woman rallied. "I can't—not now—I hate him worse than you do, Kit! I'll tell you everything when there's more time, and—"

From the gloom which shrouded the alleyway came a low but impatient whistle, and Kit Melady released his grip to mutter:

"Keep watch, then, and give us ample warning if anybody comes this way. I'll talk to you later!"

With a rude shove he sent the decoy along the pavement, then glided into the alley, where Don Fisher was impatiently awaiting his coming.

"You're taking your own sweet time, ain't ye?" he grumbled, showing his teeth after a sulky fashion from where he knelt beside the motionless body. "If it hadn't been for breaking rules, I'd have plucked the pigeon and been miles away by this. What was the matter with Belle, anyway?"

"That's what I'm going to find out—don't you bother your head over it too bad, mate! Sure, you didn't empty even one pocket before letting me know how long I was keeping you waiting?"

"I'll never tell you, if he don't," with a low laugh at the suspicion, which actually seemed to compliment his rascality.

Dark as it was where they now crouched like ghouls above their victim, neither of the rascals seemed at a loss how to set about their glad task of stripping from Dan Dunn the fruits of their dastardly crime. With them, long practice had learned fingers to take the place of eyes, and Kit Melady deftly examined each pocket and turned their contents over to his companion in evil.

These were not many, or of much intrinsic value. A few loose coins of silver. A pocket-knife. A couple of keys, tied together with a cotton string. One derringer of heavy caliber, the mate to the one which had shattered the skull of Stuart Meredith's horse that afternoon.

"If this was all, I'd call it mighty poor pay for tough work," the shorter rascal grinned, summing up, while the busy fingers of his comrade were getting at the heavy money-belt. "But there's plenty dingbats in that strip of hide—good luck our way!"

"Cheese your cackling, will you?" viciously snarled the tall crook, flashing a hot glance over his shoulder.

"Never a chirp from Belle, and there's no danger, mate!"

Kit Melady drew the money-belt from about the waist of the unconscious man, giving it a

slight rap against the stones, drawing forth a musical clink that set Don Fisher off into silent ecstasies of delight, judging from his fantastic gestures and grimaces.

"Sold ag'in an' got the tin!" he murmured, softly.

"I'd give double the amount rather than not have got even with the heavy-fisted cow-puncher, though!" grimly muttered Melady, rising to his feet with a start as a dark figure appeared at the mouth of the alley, pausing as though attracted by the sound of his voice.

"It's only the woman, mate!" muttered Fisher, catching the arm of his mate before he could strike. "It's only Belle, can't you see?"

"What is it—a cop coming? Spit it out, curse you!" grated the tall crook, leaping forward and clutching the decoy savagely by the arm.

"No one is coming, but—is he dead?" hoarsely muttered the woman, casting a fearful glance into the gloomy passage.

"Not dead, but sleeping," chuckled Fisher, irreverently.

"He must never awaken, then!" sharply muttered Shady Belle, and it was her turn to grip an arm almost savagely. "Better run the risk of killing him now than have to do it later. Better silence his tongue before it can utter a word to put the police on our track, I tell you!"

"Let him squeal! What harm can he do us? He never even caught a glimpse of our shadows, let alone our faces!"

"He did of mine, and recognized me, too!" was the swift interjection, as the decoy dropped the arm of her companion and slowly entered the alley.

With an instinctive glance up and down the dark street to make sure no one was approaching, the two thugs followed after, to find Shady Belle standing over the motionless body of their victim, her hands tightly clasped together, a curious look of mingled horror, fear, doubt and hatred showing in her pale face.

"You're dead sure he recognized you, girl?" asked Melady.

"Didn't you hear him call me by name?" "That does settle it, then!" and Don Fisher dropped to his knees by the side of the body, one hand rudely turning him from his side to his back, then feeling for his heart. "It's beginning to pump blood again, but I'll soon put a stop to all that—with thank'ee for the privilege, too!" he added, showing his teeth in a vicious grin as he drew a long, cruel-looking knife from his bosom, but only to have his hand clutched in the strong grip of Kit Melady.

"You fool! No red letters here, for the cops to decipher!"

"But—ain't we got to stop his jaw?" "It's his death, or the pen for us all!" urged the woman. "I tell you he knew me—he even called me by name, and—"

"And I'm wanting to know just when and where he learned that, too, my girl," with a short, ugly nod, then adding: "But no red letters, I repeat. They might tell altogether too much, and bitterly as I hate the devil, I'm not ready to run my neck into a noose just for the sake of seeing him creak!"

"What shall we do, then?" demanded Don Fisher, sulkily putting up his knife.

"Let me think a bit, and you, Belle, take a look at the street. It won't do to run any wild chances, just now."

Reluctantly the woman obeyed, but as she saw nothing either up or down the street to excite her suspicions, she returned to her evil companions, with hot impatience, as she awaited the decision of her master; for master Kit Melady plainly was, to both of them.

"I don't want to start a lot of police on our track, just now. I've got too big a game in view for that. And so— That's the ticket!"

"You say so, anyway!" grunted Don Fisher, sulkily.

"Belle will go and hunt up a cop. She'll tell him she chanced to see a fellow getting laid out, up this way, and will fetch help to the cow-puncher. That will let her out, when he comes to himself, easy enough. Even if he has any suspicions remaining, it will be easy to clear them away. After all, he's only an ignorant cowboy! I doubt if he ever struck a city before this week!"

There was a brief silence after this hurried speech, and Kit Melady seemed to think the whole affair was settled, when Shady Belle laughed harshly.

"You're willing to let me run the chances, are you, after I told you the fellow recognized and called me by name? Do you want to get shut of me that bad, Kit Melady?"

"Don't be a fool, Belle!"

"Take that same advice to yourself, and be sure it will fit your case better than mine," was the bitter retort. "I tell you, Kit Melady, you're either crazy or drunk when you even dream of such a clumsy trick as that! Do you call him a green cowboy? Then you're 'way off! Instead of that, he's one of the keenest detectives this side of the infernal regions! Don't I know him, to my sorrow?"

"Then you want to bid him good-by, right now and in a mighty hurry, my girl!" snarled

Don Fisher, as his ugly knife again came forth; "for if he's that sort, then he's on our trail, dead sure! so I'll shunt him off, quick!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SAND BAGGERS' VICTIM.

FOR the second time Kit Melady frustrated the bloody purpose of his squat companion, a swift motion catching the knife-armed hand and arresting the deadly stroke just as it was beginning.

"Is the devil in you, man?" the tall crook grated, savagely, as he wrenched the knife-hand back, holding it thus while he bent his head to speak, his dark eyes glowing with cat-like fire in the gloom. "Can't I turn my eyes away for even one breath, but you have to cut and flesh that bit o' steel?"

"You heard what she said, didn't you?" snarled Don Fisher.

"It's his life or our liberty, no less, Kit," coldly supplemented the decoy, drawing the shawl closer about her throat, though the night air could not be called even cool.

"But that would leave too plain a trail for the police. Give them the scent of fresh blood in their nostrils, and they'll track a ghost through the air—curse them, one and all!"

"They'll have a still plainer one, if we let the devil go free, I reckon," growled Don Fisher, still like a hungry cur from whose watering jaws an appetizing bone had been rudely plucked.

"He'll not need their help, be sure of that," nodded Shady Belle, with a low, harsh laugh so unlike her usually clear, even musical notes that Kit Melady involuntarily bent forward to obtain a closer look at her face. "If he's the green cowboy that law-sharp plucked out of your hands this day, be sure there's bitter black trouble in the air! Be sure the bloodhound is on your track—is playing you for all he's worth. And he'll get there—unless you make sure of your grip while you can!"

She spoke rapidly, almost hysterically toward the last, her white fingers closing and unclosing the shawl which formed the only wrap or head-covering she had with her the while. She cast brief, shivering glances toward that motionless figure, barely outlined against the ground, and hardly to be traced there but for Don Fisher, who still knelt beside it, one hand resting over the reviving heart, his ugly knife still showing in his right hand.

"You know too mighty much about the fellow, Belle Shado! I'll pump you dry when there's more time, but just now—"

Kit Melady cut himself short, thrusting his head forward, his eyes glowing vividly as he glared through the gloom at the lighter mouth of the alley.

"Ware hawks!" he hissed, barely above his breath. "Somebody's coming! If it's the cops—"

He dared not finish the sentence, even in that guarded tone, lest it turn suspicion in that quarter, the sounds of footsteps were now so near at hand. Either the comers had been creeping near the spot, or else they, the crooks, in their dispute had been too much excited to notice the sounds earlier.

With one hand gripping tightly the trembling wrist of Belle Shado and drawing her back to the blank wall, both crouching low down, the woman hiding her white face in the folds of her dark shawl, Kit Melady watched the alley-mouth with unwavering eyes, though he held his breath as the footsteps came closer and plainer—to pause directly in front of the little *cul-de-sac*!

Don Fisher bent low over the body of their victim, his knife fairly denting the skin of Dan Dunn's throat, ready to cut short any attempt at alarm-raising on the instant.

For one single breath the crooks suffered all the tortures of discovery in crime, but then the truth became plain enough.

"Wait a bit, Jim," came a voice from the pave, followed by the dim flicker of a freshly-lighted match. "My cigar's out."

The red light, reflected from the man's hollowed palms, showed a face which the crooks well knew belonged to none on the police or detective force. And then, casting aside the no longer needed match, the two men passed leisurely along up the street.

Not until the sound of their footfalls died away did either of the trio hovering around their helpless victim utter word or make a motion that could have awakened suspicion in the keenest ear. Then Kit Melady stole like a phantom to the alley-mouth, keenly scanning the dimly-lighted street in either direction before returning.

"Only a couple of rounders, but it gave me a chill that started the frost an inch thick on my bones!" he muttered, with a grim, ghastly attempt at facetiousness. "I thought sure the clubs were coming, and if they had, and I'd let you have your way, Don, where'd we be now?"

"I know where I'll be before morning, unless you make up your mind in a holy hurry to muzzle that demon's tongue, Kit!" panted Belle

Shado. "This town isn't big enough for us two, I tell you!"

With an impatient gesture Kit Melady sent her back to the mouth of the alley, to guard against another such disagreeable surprise. In silence the woman obeyed, but her great agitation was even more marked as she tried to move with perfect silence. She tripped and stumbled; only for the blank wall she would have fallen flat. Yet Kit Melady had just passed over the same ground, and could have made oath it was perfectly free from all obstructions.

More than anything else, this little incident convinced him that the woman was thoroughly sincere in her repeated warning. As a rule, she was opposed to violence, and it had been hard work to win her over to lending her aid in this case. Bloodshed was her horror. Then something remarkable must have happened between Belle and this seemingly ignorant cowboy, to so completely change her nature.

It is possible that her very eagerness to have this stranger forever silenced helped to prolong his life, for a more jealous rascal than Kit Melady never drew the breath of life. And even while feeling that Dan Dunn must be put to sleep in sober earnest, he was trying to devise a plan by which he could first learn the whole truth of Belle's past connection with him!

"Time's passing in a mighty hurry, mate!" warningly muttered Don Fisher, as he glanced up from his position beside their victim. "Any minute may fetch the cops down on our shoulders—and mine are two mighty sore now, from his heels—curse him from crown to sole!"

As the memory of how unceremoniously Dan Dunn had dashed his face into the dirt on the bluff came back to him, the burly ruffian twisted one hand in the long locks of the cowboy, and crowded his face into the damp, foul-smelling soil.

There was no resistance. Not a sound came from those lips. Not a quiver of a muscle told that aught of life remained in that stalwart figure after the cruel blow beneath which he had fallen.

"You're sure the job isn't done, then?" muttered Melady, as this fact struck him, and kneeling down he pushed aside the hand of his comrade, resting his own above the heart of the motionless figure.

He gave a little start as he felt the full, regular throbbing below, and he glared with strong suspicion into the pale face with its closed lids and immobile features.

"If he's playing 'possum!"

"Just what was beginning to work its way through my nogging," Don Fisher muttered, his hand stealing back in readiness to close upon the throat of their victim in case he should attempt to call out for aid. "He don't feel like a senseless man, and his blood-pump works too even to suit me 'way up! Still, if we croak him in—"

A warning growl from Kit Melady cut his sanguinary speech short, but the alarm was a false one. Belle Shado was approaching, but it was only to again urge the necessity of putting it out of the power of this terrible sleuth to send them "over the road."

"It's got to be done, or I'll levant before the night grows old, even if I have to leave everything of value behind save my own life!" she impetuously uttered.

Even then Kit Melady seemed in doubt. Not that he really knew the meaning of the word mercy, in its purest sense, for a more utterly ruthless wretch never drew the breath of life than this same sand-bagger. But that mad jealousy was doing battle against his own sense of prudence, and he was wondering if he could ever get at the bottom of this strange affair without the help of Dan Dunn, be he cowboy or detective.

"Me too!" nodded Don Fisher, with emphasis. "If he recognized Belle, that's enough to point out the rest of the outfit. I ain't taking any too long chances. It's either croak for him, or leg-bail for me. You can make your own choice, Kitsy, but you want to be in a hurry!"

With a vicious snarl that made his teeth glisten in the dim light that entered through the alley mouth, Kit Melady yielded to his companions, though secretly vowing to learn the whole truth if he had to beat it out of the woman whom he called his wife.

"Hold your hush, curse ye both! If you hadn't kept my wits all mixed up with your infernal clack and clatter, I'd have arranged the thing long ago. As it is—Belle, you know Jumbo?"

"The fat hack-driver?"

Kit Melady nodded assent, casting an uneasy glance toward the alley mouth, into which he fancied there floated the faint sound of approaching voices. But as he listened the sound, real or fancied, came no more, and he hurriedly added:

"I want Jumbo, or his hack would do better, for that matter, so—"

"I can find him quickest, I reckon," cut in Fisher, rising to his feet. "Belle isn't fitly rigged out for the bright streets, and some of those infernal cops might take a notion to run her in for not being at home."

"Let it go at that, then," nodded Kit Melady, briefly. "You can do the job best, after all,

for you can turn Jumbo out of his seat to fill it yourself. That will make one tongue less to guard, when it's all over."

"I'm to fetch the hack back here?"

"Yes. Pick your time when the street is empty, but don't be any longer than you can possibly help. Pull out, now, and don't go to sleep on the road."

Don Fisher put up his knife, with a longing scowl down at that pale face, then turned and quickly glided out of the alley.

"What sort of game have you in view, Kit?" asked Belle Shado, in low, hurried tones. "Surely you're not thinking of keeping him captive, or any mad folly of that sort?"

"Don't you bother your head too hard, girl," growled the sand-bagger, flashing a look of ugly suspicion up into her white face as he spoke. "Maybe I want to hold the rascal fast until I've drawn from him all about his and your past life. Maybe I want to check the yarn you have got to spin, with the story he tells. How does that hit you?"

"I don't understand what—why, Kit!" with a short, harsh laugh, as she stooped to more clearly see his dark face. "You are not jealous of him? That devil in human shape? And I begging you to forever still his evil brain? Man, you are going crazy!"

"Maybe I am—maybe only regaining my senses, Belle," grimly retorted the crook, as he thrust her back, adding: "Go keep a lookout, will you? Do you want to be penned up in this hole like a rat?"

Belle Shado, despite her strong agitation over the startling discovery she had made so unexpectedly, was shrewd enough to see that any further attempt at smoothing the ruffled feathers of her suspicious mate would be worse than useless, just then, and without a word of reproach she again left the alley to keep guard on the lonely street.

Kit watched until her dark-clothed figure disappeared from view, then he bent over his victim once more, trying to decide whether or no Dan Dunn was still insensible, or was playing 'possum, as Don Fisher had suspected.

Certainly the cowboy, or detective, was not dead, for his heart was doing its work with regularity, but beyond this even shrewd Kit Melady could not pronounce.

"All right, my covey!" he muttered, as he rolled the body over on its face, twisting both hands to the rear and deftly securing them with a strong, pliable cord which he drew from his pocket. "I'd heap rather have you alive, after all! I want you to know who is sending you to your death! I wouldn't feel half-way even if you didn't!"

CHAPTER XIV.

DON FISHER COUNTS HIS CHICKENS.

MUTTERING thus, Kit Melady rolled his victim over on his back, lifting an eyelid with the tip of a finger and staring keenly into the eye thus exposed. Not a sign of consciousness could he detect, and he drew back with a breath of relief.

"He's unconscious, that's certain, strong and regular though his heart beats. Will he ever regain his senses? I've heard of such cases, though I never really ran up against one before."

He bent his head in listening, gazing toward the mouth of the alley; but no alarming sound came from thence, and his breath resumed as he saw the dark figure of Belle Shado slowly pass by and caught her covert signal that all was going well.

At brief intervals examining his victim, Kit Melady passed the time necessary for Don Fisher to accomplish his share in the job. Once he felt sure he caught a quiver of an eyelid, though after inspection afforded no confirmation of this suspicion; but, to be on the safe side, he tied a silk handkerchief tightly over the lips of the motionless man, thus rendering it impossible for him to cry out with sufficient distinctness to bring aid, even should such be passing close at hand.

Once Belle Shado came creeping into the darkness whispering that a policeman was approaching. Together they crouched over the helpless figure, Kit with one hand resting on his throat, ready to shut off all attempt at outcry, furtively glaring toward the dim opening beyond.

They saw the burly guardian of the night appear—and even pause before the entrance, gazing directly toward them as though his suspicions were awakened to a sense of something going wrong. But this must have been pure fancy, for a moment later the officer walked on, his heavy steps soon dying out in the distance.

Don Fisher cut little time to waste in carrying out his portion of the contract, for he knew just where to look for the hackman, but it seemed a long and trying wait for both Kit Melady and Shady Belle before they caught the faint sound of wheels drawing nearer along the macadamized street.

In his anxiety lest there should, even now, be an error made, Kit bade Belle watch beside the prisoner, while he himself went out to the alley-mouth to see that all was working proper-

ly. And he drew a long breath of relief as his keen glances failed to detect any other living objects than the hack with the double team and driver rolling slowly toward the alley where he stood.

Satisfied on this point, he stepped out to the curb, waving his hand as a signal to Don Fisher, who touched up the horses and quickly drew rein at his side.

"All right, boss," grinned the crook, in true hackman's style. "Any part o' the city fer—All's hunky, then, pard?"

"Get down and help. The horses will stand all right?"

"Stiff as a post. Jumbo wouldn't be seen with any other. Now what is the peppergum?" asked Fisher, as he alighted beside his fellow-crook.

"First, to get the fellow safely inside. After that we can talk. Then, if any one should happen by, they wouldn't know any better when we drove off, don't you see?"

"Clear as mud, and I'm the boy to tote the critter out o' the dark to everlasting light—with plenty o' fire understood!" grinned Don Fisher, perfectly happy now that he seemed in a fair way to be revenged on the man who had "played him for a sucker" that day just past.

He was as good as his word, though Dan Dunn, his whole form limp and seemingly without life, proved a heavy load which would have made all but an unusually powerful man call for assistance. And as Kit Melady nodded permission to cross the pave, he strode forward, dumping his load on the rear seat of the hack, propping him up in a corner with mock tenderness.

"That settles the first part, anyhow!" he nodded brushing his hands and grinning into the face of his comrade. "What comes next?"

"Remember, Kit," and Belle Shado came close up to him as she added: "It must be clean work, or I'll levant for good! I'll never run the risk of being sent to the pen by that bloodhound!"

"Get inside—"

"Not with him," shivered the woman, shrinking back. "Never mind about me. I'll go home and wait for your coming. Only—swear that you won't give him even the ghost of a chance to get loose!"

Kit Melady glanced up and down the street before replying. All was silent. Not a living being was to be seen in either direction. The cross street, besides being in wretched repair, was short and obscure, with little to attract passengers.

Satisfied that there was little danger of their being interrupted, for some little time, at least, the tall crook proceeded to divulge to his companions the plan he had formed for the secure disposal of their plundered victim.

"You thought I was foolishly merciful, Fisher, because I checked your hand in yonder, when you were about to write murder in bright red letters for all the cops to study out."

"It was the shortest way, and after what Belle said, I—"

"Never mind that, just now. I'll talk it over with Belle when we get back from our little trip," nodded Melady, with a dark glance into the white but eager face of the woman decoy. "What I decided to do, is just this:

"I'll get inside with the baggage, while you play driver, Don. You will make your way across the line, and cross the bridge over the Kaw. If it is empty when you get there, draw up near the middle, and we'll lose our gentleman right then and there!"

"Drop him into the drink, you mean?"

"Put a knife in his heart, first!" panted the woman, viciously. "If you don't he'll manage some way to escape, and then—bad luck to us! Oh, you don't know him as I know him, or you wouldn't throw away a single chance! You would slit his throat and open his heart and—"

"Do everything else to raise a hue and cry when the carcass was discovered, of course!" harshly sneered Melady. "I'll make sure enough, if only to stop your sweet howling; but I'll do it with my little pet, and never leave a sign to whisper of foul play or anything worse than accident or suicide in the morning!"

"Good as hard wheat!" chuckled Don Fisher, grimly gleeful. "Reckon he won't go to playing leap-frog with no other gentleman! Reckon—Eh?"

Kit Melady was staring down the street where a lamp was dimly burning. By its rays a couple of men could just be distinguished, apparently coming that way.

"Pull out for home, Belle, and see that you're there when we come back. I want a little talk with you!" muttered Kit Melady, as he entered the hack, closing the door behind him and remarking to Don Fisher as he pulled up the windows and drew the curtains: "Hop on, pard, and play your prettiest, now!"

"Never fear me, Kitsy!" with a laugh as he mounted the seat in front, gathering up lines and whip as he started up his team. "Jumbo himself can't hold a tallow dip to me when I want to put on frills!"

He saw Belle Shado gliding away through the

darkness. He cast a glance back toward the lamp which had betrayed the approach of the strangers, but saw nothing to disturb him in that direction.

"Isn't it a jolly lark, though?" the burly rascal muttered to himself, as he rolled down the next cross-street, quickly gaining another thoroughfare where the bright lights and the hurrying lines of pedestrians on either side, the many hacks and carriages rolling smoothly over the wooden blocks, formed a strong contrast with the gloom and loneliness which he had so recently abandoned.

Why should he not be in high spirits? Had they not wiped out the ignominious defeat which they had that day received at the hands—and feet, as Don Fisher reflected, with a shrug of his broad shoulders!—of the seemingly green cowboy? Was not his gold freighted belt safely in their possession? Was not the rascally impostor himself securely bound and gagged and entirely at their mercy?

"I want to see him go in swimming—I want to see it mighty bad!" chuckled the ruffian, as he skillfully guided his team along the crowded street, now running beside the cable-line track, the musical bell of the cars ringing out as they crossed each street. "I reckon it'll take all the soreness out of my back, and draw down this swelling in my nose—he drove it a clean foot into the ground, curse him!"

For some distance Don Fisher drove straight ahead, but then was forced to leave the cable line, as he did not care to run any risks by following the steep descent leading to the Union Depot direct, sheering off to the left and pursuing a roundabout way instead.

"There's plenty of time, and though I reckon Kitsy will take good care the cowboy don't set up one of his wild and woolly whoops, what's the use in running chances you don't have to?" reflected Fisher, with a nod of grim satisfaction at his new-born caution. "I want to see the fellow do a little Larry Donovan act. I want to see him turn bridge-jumper, and finish up with a grand swimming exhibition in boulders."

He safely guided his spirited team down the sloping street, then rolled away across the level bottom-land on which the vast network of steel rails is spread like the countless lines drawn by a diligent spider in forming its web.

At times, when the tracks had to be crossed, the wheels bumping and the back swaying like a storm-tossed boat in the breakers, Don Fisher drove slowly and with greater caution, for he did not care to run the risk of breaking a spring or twisting off a wheel, knowing as he did how quickly a curious crowd will collect for the merest trifle by way of excuse.

"And that might prove troublesome, my boy!" he chuckled, with a nod over one shoulder as though addressing his speech to Kit Melady. "That might bring out queries as to who the dainty gent is that has to have his hands bound behind his back and a kerchief over his mouth to protect his lungs from the raw night air—ha! ha! ha!"

The Union Depot, with its hurrying crowds, its rumbling trains, its garish electric lights, was left safely behind him. He drew near to the huge frame building which marked the "State Line," with its countless tracks, its numberless freight-cars standing dark and silent, to cross the imaginary line which divides the two great States.

He rolled rapidly along through Kansas City, Kansas, with its great manufactories and machine shops, now heading direct for one of the many iron bridges which span the sluggish Kansas River near its junction with the mighty Missouri.

"It's a little further to travel, but then, the gentleman will have all the more room for his swimming exhibition before getting tangled in one of the fish-nets," chuckled Don Fisher, softly. "He won't be the first haul of the same sort the fishermen have brought to light, by a good many, but I can't help that. Kitsy knows how to play the sand-bag to a chromo, and there'll be no marks left to whisper of worse than accident while drunk, or suicide while in hard luck! Anyway, nobody'll have a license to point a finger our way; and that's enough for me!"

As the approach to the bridge was neared Don Fisher slackened the pace of his team, peering eagerly ahead to make sure that there would be no awkward delay in finishing their dastardly job.

"If it's empty, good enough! If it isn't, I'll have to cross over and turn about to come back again for another whack! It's got to be clean work, if I spend all night driving back and forth!"

But fortune seemed to be smiling upon them in this instance, for the long stretch showed not even a foot-passenger as Don Fisher drove upon the bridge, and hurrying his team to near the center, he drew rein and sprang from the box, grinning broadly as he turned to open the door for his companion in crime.

"It's all right, pard—couldn't be better!" he muttered, as he opened the door wide, thrusting his head inside. "Not even a—"

He started back with a sharp cry of mingled rage and wonder, for the moment unable to be-

lieve the evidence of his own senses. For Dan was nowhere to be seen! And Kit Melady, with all of his face hidden but his staring, glassy eyes, fell limply from the back seat!

CHAPTER XV.

A GRIM OLD SINNER.

NICOL FAULKNER leaned toward the burly rough as he spoke, his dark eyes glowing without disguise, his face actually repulsive with its faithful portraiture of the evil passions which filled his brain.

Brocky Sam lay back in his chair, his eyes half-closed, his thick lips tightly pursed up, his stumpy fingers playing a clumsy tattoo on his broad chest. Though he looked so dull, so heavy, so inert, just then, with a start Nicol Faulkner felt that he was reading him through and through.

He drew back quickly, the flush fading out of his dark face, a curious mingling of fear and suspicion coming into his eyes. But he doggedly repeated his words:

"Name your own figures, Sam Crossley, and I'll never kick. If you won't take the job, I can find others who will, and glad to jump at the chance. And as for blackmail—"

He left the half-formed threat incomplete as Brocky Sam lifted a hand with a lazy imitation of brushing away some troublesome insect.

For a single breath the young broker hesitated, then growled:

"Why don't you say either yes or no? You wanted plain business, and I've given it you, straight as a string. Now—what?"

"Don't tear your linen, dear boy," drawled the burly ruffian, with a very fair imitation of a yawn as he glanced toward the door as though longing for the return of the man whom he had dispatched after a fresh supply of liquor and cigars. "I thought I heard your steward coming from below, but I reckon he's counting it his watch off."

"Curse the man—"

"Just what I was doing in my own heart, Nick," laughed Brocky Sam, giving his burly figure a shake and taking on a more wide-awake look from that moment. "Curious how two gentlemen can think and do the self-same thing at the self-same moment, isn't it?"

This time there was no mistake. Hurried steps came up the flight to pause at the door, which Nicol Faulkner flung open with a curse. He took the box and bottles which his man carried, bade him begone for the night, re-closed the door and turned its key.

"That's all I was waiting for, pardner," nodded his peculiar visitor, as he briskly took possession of a bottle, deftly knocking off its neck to save the trouble of drawing a cork, filling and emptying a glass before taking breath. "I'll do it, of course, since you've made up your mind that the job must be jobbed, boss."

"It took you an infernally long time to make up your mind!" growled the young broker, resuming his seat, but still with a doubting glow in his dark eyes.

"It's a big job to do as well as a big job to pay for when done, you want to remember, boss. Not that there's so terrible much in snuffing out a human candle, provided you can pick and choose to suit yourself, spending your wind on a dip that nobody'll miss when the light goes out. But when it comes to shying a stone through the globe of an electric light that stands on a public corner—that's quite another thing, let me whisper in your pearly ear."

By this time Nicol Faulkner had quite recovered from his brief uneasiness, and a cold sneer curled his lips as he fancied he had the solution fairly before him. It was no shrinking from bloodshed, but a cunning wish to enhance the price of his services that actuated Brocky Sam, turning him for the nonce into a prosy moralist.

"All of which means the adding of—how many ciphers?" he sneered, showing his teeth at a ugly fashion as he opened the box of cigars to select a weed for his own use.

Brocky Sam reached over and helped himself, ignoring the sneer as he struck a match and waited for the brimstone to burn off.

"The poet—or some other moralizing cuss—says that the very worst use you can put a man to is to hang him. For hanging, read creaking in any other shape. Thus amended, I'm signing the articles with the broadest-nibbed pen you can find in the whole box. And to bring the matter closer home—what's the use of turning this crank wrong end up, when you can make so much better use of him, and at the same time punish him ten times as keenly as by death?"

"What are you trying to get through you, anyhow?"

"Wait until I get this weed to fumigating properly. Pity your Yankees couldn't take a leaf out of our note-book: I'm English, you know! Why won't you give your cigars time to season and dry out properly?"

Nicol Faulkner sunk back in his seat with a half-smothered oath, resigning himself to the inevitable. Though he had not spent very many months in the companionship of this pock-marked ruffian he had learned to recognize one

peculiarity: Brocky Sam could be coaxed, but not driven in a course contrary to his liking.

With the cigar lit to his fancy, Brocky Sam abruptly dropped his irritable manner, quietly uttering:

"Now I'm ready for plain business, boss. What has set you up in arms against this young sprout of the law? What fresh mischief has he been into? What greater reason have you for wanting him out of the world this evening than you had last night at the same hour?"

Even with strong bonds of evil between them, Nicol Faulkner hesitated to reply. Though he knew that Brocky Sam had long since summed him up at his actual value, he found it hard to fully expose his jealousy to his view.

"It sticks in your craw, I see," the burly ruffian nodded, after a moment's waiting. "All right. Maybe I can get along without your help. I picked up the story of that little accident, and I reckon I got it tolerably straight."

"It was your bad luck, not your lack of nerve or good-will, that hindered you from playing the part this law-sharp took upon himself. You seemed to doubt which one had the lead in the race, before that, and now you naturally fancy the dark horse has given you his dust. Ain't you letting your—call it diffidence—run away with you, boss?"

Nicol Faulkner no longer hesitated, but with poorly smothered rage he told everything: how he had been refused an audience with Miss Meredith, only to see, five minutes later, his hated rival promptly admitted.

"Isn't that enough?" he grated, with an ugly oath, his dark eyes glowing redly. "If not—listen!"

Rapidly, accurately, without trying to conceal even the slightest detail, he told Brocky Sam what had happened on the bluffs, where Linnet Meredith must surely have found a frightful death but for the strong arm and prompt daring of the young lawyer. He dwelt on how the maiden left the carriage to speak a last word to Eric Alvord.

"She made an appointment with him then, right under our eyes! I know it as surely as though I had caught her every word!"

With provoking coolness Brocky Sam listened to all the jealous broker had to offer, then quietly commented:

"Grant all that, and what less could you expect? If you had saved her life as he undoubtedly did, she would have received you just as she received him, this evening. It proves no more than that she is grateful for her daring rescue."

"Still, to fall in with your humor, we'll say that you've proved your point. We'll grant that you have ample cause for fearing this shyster has cut you out of the running. What matter?"

"I'll kill him a thousand times over, sooner than see him wed the girl!" viciously grated the broker.

"Once killing ought to be a big plenty," laughed the grim old sinner, flicking off the white ashes from the glowing tip of his cigar. "I ain't blaming you for hating him. In your place, no doubt I'd feel mighty hungry to get even. But—unlike you—I'd rather see him suffer while living!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"That you can wring his heart dry, drop by drop, if you agree to curb that infernal temper of yours—don't I know you came by it honestly?—and let me do the steering for a bit. I'll promise to run you direct into the port of matrimony, and Miss Meredith will be your consort, even though she has agreed to sign articles with Alvord, master, for a life voyage!"

Quietly but earnestly Brocky Sam uttered these words, and Nicol Faulkner caught his breath sharply, the hot blood tingling through his veins as he listened. If this could be brought about, he felt that he could indeed put his rival to a better use than killing him!

"But how—how can you do this?" he stammered, his brain whirling with the swift revulsion.

"By following the precise course I've pricked out on a private chart of my own manufacture," laughed the burly rascal, filling a second glass of brandy for himself, then pushing the bottle across the table to his companion. "Drink hearty, mate!"

But the broker did not avail himself of this advice. With his blood already on fire, he did not feel the need of such a stimulant. He wanted most to have Brocky Sam prove the practicality of his bold assertion, and impatiently intimated as much.

"All right, boss," with a business-like nod. "You know I brought you here, promising to show you the royal road to wealth. You've made a pretty good thing of it already, and are set down on the papers as a particularly able-bodied—excuse me! It's hard to forget one's early training, you see!"

"What you have done, though, has been only getting ready. Now the fruit is ripe, and I'm going to show you how to shake the tree."

"Let Eric Alvord rest for to-night. To-morrow you will call on the nabob and ask permission to court his daughter. If he gives his

consent, all right; you'll only have to press your suit in regular fashion. If he refuses, either of his own will or because young Alvord has cut the ground from under your feet, thanks for this day's work, then I'll show you how to put the screws on the old rascal until he squeals!"

"But how? What hold have you over him?" eagerly asked the young broker as Brocky Sam ceased speaking.

"What matter, just so you know I have got him foul?"

"But have you?" persisted Faulkner, far from satisfied with this mystery. "How do I know I won't find myself in a worse box than ever, if I follow your lead so blindly?"

"Have I led you into a bog, so far, boss?" laughed Brocky Sam, but with a sudden kindling in his deep-set eyes. "Haven't I dealt out the pure white article to you from first cutting the cards? Hasn't everything come about, just as I told you it would when I proposed this big game to you? And you at the time up to your chin in the mire!"

Nicol Faulkner made no reply in words. He reached across the table and grasped the hairy, rough hand of the burly ruffian, pressing it warmly.

"That's enough, lad," nodded Brocky Sam, the light in his little eyes softening. "When you're good, you're very, very good—like the little girl in the almanac! Stick to that tack until I bid you alter your course. I'm in the same swim, and when I say that I'm playing for the biggest stake of my life, you can depend on my throwing away no single chance."

"I'll post you fully, but not to-night. For one thing, I'm hungry. For another, I've got an appointment which stands me in hand to keep promptly. For another—and that's the main reason—I think you can play your part better if you don't know any more than enough to take this first hand through."

"If you think best—"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't say so, lad, be sure of that. I tell you, Nick, it's a grand game! There's a cool million in it—no less!"

"I'll play my part just as you line it out. And if Stuart Meredith should show me the door?"

"So much the worse for him!" with an almost vicious glitter in his little eyes. "Only for saving time, I'd rather he would do something like that! I want to see him squirm and writhe and beg for mercy as I put on the screws! And unless he does come to time—we'll have the fun of watching the Nabob of Quality Hill with a rope collar on!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

"LINNET—Miss Meredith!"

Swiftly that warm touch ended. With a quick, checking gesture the blushing maiden sprang back as Eric Alvord lifted his head, fairly intoxicated with joy as his eyes met hers.

"Not yet—wait, Mr. Alvord!" the girl hastily uttered, as she lifted her little hand in warning. "It is my turn, now!"

The change was so sudden, so wholly unexpected, that Eric Alvord could hardly realize its meaning. His heart sunk rapidly, and he began to think all was lost, despite the rare smile which could be seen on the beautiful face of the woman he loved far beyond all else earthly.

For an instant Linnet faltered as she saw his face turn white from pain. She even swayed slightly toward him, her lips quivering, her bosom swelling, her eyes filled with such a light as no man ever saw who was not wholly, truly, passionately loved.

But Eric was too startled just then to read the truth, plainly as it was written. He had never dared to more than faintly hope, even when his spirits were highest. And now, when he had nerved himself to dare all, those hopes were at their lowest ebb.

With an effort Linnet restrained herself, leaning upon the back of the easy-chair which she had deserted for the moment to arouse her despondent lover with that warm touch. She schooled her face to calmness, and her tones, though low, were calm and even as she uttered:

"It is my turn to talk, and your turn to listen patiently, Mr. Alvord," she began. "You have been most painfully frank in speaking of your past, of yourself. I will follow the example you set. I will speak without reserve, let the consequence be what it may."

This was hardly a promising introduction, taking merely the surface indications, and in his blindness Eric Alvord shivered with pain as he sat rigid, sternly schooling himself to face and bear the worst.

Inwardly agitated though she was, the maiden could not miss seeing how severely he was suffering, and it was only by hastily averting her own face for a breath that she kept from self-betrayal then and there.

"You have made full confession to me, Mr. Alvord, in all save giving the name of the proud, haughty, aristocratic lady of your adoration, and—wait!" again checking him with up-

lifted hand. "I do not wish to hear her name, just yet!"

"Your having been so candid justifies me in being the same. And, strange though it seems, my brief life experience, in one respect, has been almost identical with yours!"

"I, too, know what it means to fall in love. And, like yourself, my poor heart has surrendered to one, the proudest of the proud, a king among kings, in my poor judgment the noblest, wisest, handsomest, best of all mankind—were it not for one single failing! The man of my love—alas!—is stone blind!"

With a quick motion Linnet pushed the chair aside, slowly approaching the young lawyer, her face rarely lighted up by a smile that seemed like magic in driving the mist from his vision and letting a flood of most glorious light into his dizzy brain. And slowly her hands were extended toward him. Softly came the words in addition:

"Stone blind! For even now he cannot read the truth! Eric—"

With a low cry of intense relief, his arms were about her yielding form, pressing her tightly to his swelling bosom. And then his lips sought hers.

"Offer me a penny for my thoughts, dear Eric!"

"To hear is to obey, my queen," softly murmured the young lawyer.

"I was wondering whether you proposed to me, or I to you?" laughed Linnet, but hiding her soft blushes against his shoulder as his arm drew tighter about her lithe waist.

"And I was wondering whether this is not all a wild, intoxicating dream, from which I am fated to awaken all too soon!" he uttered, his tones far from steady, his face suddenly paling at the thought.

Despite that close embrace, Linnet managed to turn her face fairly to his, something of reproach, not wholly unmixed with anger, visible in her lustrous eyes.

"Doubting, even yet, Eric?"

His lips softly touched hers, and a rare smile came into his face for an instant, but his tones were grave as he made reply:

"Not you, darling—never again will I doubt your perfect love!"

"Isn't that enough, then?"

"Ten thousand times more than my poor merits deserve, Linnet, as you know without the telling. But—your father?"

With a sudden deftness, the maiden freed herself from his arm, an uplifted hand checking his movement to recover his advantage.

"Not yet, Eric," she uttered, with something of the gravity which she had assumed for the purpose of punishing her doubting lover at first, but with more of genuineness now than then. "It is never too early to place ourselves on the proper footing. And once for all, I'm going to set your fears and doubts at rest!"

"You are not angry with me, Linnet?"

"Not angry, but—hurt!" and a sudden moisture dimmed the luster of her dark eyes. "And—to tell the whole truth—somewhat provoked that you should have so little faith in the woman whom you have blessed with your precious love!"

"Linnet—darling—"

Once more the maiden motioned him back, then left the sofa to take a chair at a little distance.

Poor Eric! A cloud seemed settling over the delicious prospect of a minute since, and he felt as though it had already dampened him to the very bones. Of course he deserved it all, and much more, but he was terribly in love, and had such a humble opinion of his own merits in comparison with the object of his soul's adoration.

"It is better so, Eric," gravely added Linnet, as her lover sunk back, the picture of doubt and despair. "It is for your own good, as well as mine, that I am forcing myself to speak after this fashion. For if we begin with doubts and fears, what will the ending be?"

"How can I help it, when I remember what your father's position and habits are?"

"And at the same time forget what my disposition is, as well as your own merits!" swiftly added the maiden, smiling brightly, only to resume her former seriousness a moment later. "And right there you show your weakest point, dear, though it proves how utterly you love me—for which I mean to thank you, at the proper moment."

"You were careful to place before me everything that could possibly be brought against you, as a suitor for the hand of my father's child. But you forgot to sum up your merits as a balance."

"You are honest, truthful, talented, a rising young man, as I once heard father say, himself. If not rich, you will be in course of time. No true man of your powers can remain poor and obscure in these days."

"You saved my life to-day. And—best of all—you love me!"

It would have taken a much stronger barrier than her little hand to check Eric Alvord as those last words dropped with such sweetness, yet with such intense love, from her red lips.

Nor did Linnet try to keep him at bay, after that. Yet, as they sat side by side, his arm about her waist, his cheek touching her silken hair as her head leaned against his shoulder, she continued to speak, gravely, earnestly:

"I cannot say that you are wholly wrong in your estimate of my father, dear. I know his failings, though your ears are the only ones that will ever hear me admit that he is not entirely perfect. I know how proud, how stern he can be when anything crosses his will. I know, too, how great store he sets on his name and lineage. I know that he has vowed that he would never yield his daughter to any man as a husband who could not point to as clear and honorable a past."

"While I have not even a name I can justly call my own!"

"Do grapes grow on thistles?" quickly uttered Linnet, lifting her head until their eyes met fairly. "If you came from the gutter, as you admitted was possible a little while ago, you fell into it through no fault of your own. I do not believe your parents could have been evil, else the taint must have shown in their son, long before this. But even if I knew such was the case; even though I had the plainest possible proof that your parents were evil to the very core—the blackest and vilest of all criminals—still it would make no difference in my love for you! Unless—it made that love purer, holier, more perfect, if that could be!"

Eric Alvord was too greatly affected by this passionate proof of her love to speak. In silence he bent his head and touched her hair with his quivering lips. And Linnet pressed his hand gently, fully entering into his feelings. There was no need of words to tell her how he was thanking her in his heart of hearts.

But Linnet was not yet through. She showed a rare persistence that evening, for one of her age and teachings.

"It is a life for a life, Eric. You gave me my life to-day. To-night I give it to you, without reserve or doubt. In all but the empty word, it has long been yours. For, even before you dared confess even to your own heart that I was dear to you, I loved you with a love that can only end with my life."

"With me, dear, it must be all or nothing! Where my heart has gone out, my body must follow. And as long as you love me nothing on earth can divide us against your wish."

"Not even your father's commands, Linnet?"

"Not even that," with increased gravity, but without the faintest hesitation came the response. "I love and honor him as a daughter should. He is very dear to me. I would sooner lose my right hand than cause him grief. But—Eric, my love for you is even stronger! Without you I feel that life would not be worth living. And feeling this way, I do not hesitate to say that, even if father should be so hard-hearted, so cruel, so harsh as to deny your rights and my wishes, it would only cause me great sorrow, but never force obedience!"

"Could I see you at enmity with him, your only living parent?"

"I hope and trust the occasion will never arise, Eric, but if it should, we must bear up under the storm as bravely as may be. If I can bear it, why not you?"

"It is wholly on your account I feel troubled, Linnet."

"Then try to forget it all," with an effort at cheerfulness which was not altogether a success. "Never forget that I am wholly yours, by right of conquest. You saved my life by risking your own, and it is no more than right that this should be so. Do you regret it, Eric?"

No need to put his answer on record. Though he still retained a shadow of his former dread, knowing as he did the proud, haughty, stern character of the nabob, the young lawyer would have been less than human if he could have continued gloomy or fearful after that.

"You have lent me greater courage than I ever expected to feel, little angel," he murmured, after a time. "And unless you object I will call on your father to-morrow, to tell him all and ask of him the dearest, sweetest, most precious boon one man ever had power to bestow upon another—you, my darling!"

Linnet hesitated, but it was only for a little while. Her rare good sense told her that nothing was to be gained by putting off the decisive moment. Even plainer than Eric, she foresaw the obstacles which lay in their path, but she would not show it just then. It had been far too hard a battle to fully restore his natural courage.

"Father is at his office this evening. He would go down-town, though suffering somewhat from the bruises he received in that fall from the carriage. He is so sensitive! He feared giving rise to talk and surmise if he failed to show himself as usual. And—"

On the gravel driveway the sound of hoofs and wheels drawing up before the mansion. Then came the slow, stern tones of the nabob as he ascended the marble flight leading to the front door.

The lovers interchanged glances. Eric turned pale, but his tones were steady and firm as he murmured:

"Why put it off, darling? I will tell him all, as soon as he comes in, unless you positively forbid my doing so."

"I will go with you," was the unexpected response.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LITTLE JOKER.

It will be remembered that when Dan Dunn caught the faint sounds telling of Kit Melady's approach with ready sand-bag, he ducked his head as he instinctively divined his danger, feeling sure that Shady Belle was indeed playing a part to entrap him to his harm.

This motion did not save him from being stricken down by that terrible if silent weapon, but it undoubtedly lessened the weight of the blow, and possibly saved his life. For Kit Melady had a muscular arm, and his bruised and blackened eyes urged him to call every ounce of that strength into play just then.

Dan Dunn was senseless when his body struck the pavement, and of all that took place in the gloomy alley, he was wholly ignorant. Despite the suspicions of Don Fisher, stirred for the most part by the surprisingly regular and powerful beating of his heart, the detective was completely unconscious until after the sanguinary ruffian had hurried away in search of Jumbo, the fat hack-driver.

It was when Kit Melady opened his eye-lid with a finger that Dan Dunn first became conscious—in a dim, shadowy, dream-like fashion—that he was alive. And it was fortunate for him that his brain awoke before his purely muscular system.

He was alive. He knew that some serious trouble had overtaken him. That he was still in danger. But that was all, for the first few minutes. He did not know what that trouble was. He knew not what peril threatened, nor how it might be guarded against.

It was the low, eager, bitter tones of Belle Shado that completed the work of restoration, though she would have cursed herself had she even suspected as much. And as the evil pair crouched over him, waiting and watching while the policeman slowly passed along in front of the alley-mouth, Dan Dunn seemed to recognize everything that had passed, and to fully appreciate his dangerous situation.

A barely distinguishable motion told him his hands were bound behind him. He felt the silken muffler over his lips, and though it gave slight hindrance to his breathing, he knew by instinct that it would muffle his tones too much for speedy recognition by the now vanished officer. And he knew that, at his first attempt at outcry, those deadly fingers which touched his throat would bury themselves deep in his flesh.

All this passed through the mind of the helpless detective in that single moment while the temptation lasted. And knowing that any such effort could only end in his own undoing, Dan Dunn lay motionless, seemingly unconscious of all, under the hand of his bitter enemy.

With the passage of each minute his strength of body and mind came back to him, and though they little suspected the alarming truth, when Don Fisher and Kit Melady stowed their supposed victim away in the borrowed hack, his wits were never clearer, his nerve never more perfect, nor his limbs capable of making a stronger fight for life.

It was well for Dan Dunn that his enemies were so unsuspicious, else Kit Melady would hardly have spoken so freely within his earshot as he did while divulging his bold and deadly plans to Don Fisher. And steel-nerved though the detective was, he could not avoid shivering a bit as he realized what might have been his fate had his senses not returned to him before this.

Might have been?

His own mode of expression. For, helpless as he seemed just then, Dan Dunn confidently expected to escape from the toils, and to turn the tables on his captors, even as he had baffled them once before that day.

Kit Melady entered the hack, closing windows and drawing the thick red curtains, the more certainly to guard against discovery when the brilliantly-lighted streets should be entered. His trained touch assured him that Dan Dunn was still propped up in the corner, on the rear seat, and as the carriage rolled briskly away, the tall crook placed himself directly opposite, his knees bracing the pretended cowboy securely in position, making it impossible for him to start or roll from his corner without attracting instant attention, even while that utter darkness prevailed.

But this did not last long. Don Fisher quickly struck into Main street, and though the heavy curtains effectually prevented any inward look, sufficient red light sifted through for Kit Melady to distinguish his captive, and note his slightest movement.

A limp, inert, jelly-like heap he seemed, with head lolling on his chest, his back curved, his weight seeming to rest on his spine, half up to his shoulders. And as Kit Melady, with an ugly grin on his bruised face, leaned forward with bended ear close to the face of his victim, a dull, labored, irregular breathing was all that told of lingering life.

"Belle was drunk or crazy!" he muttered, frowning darkly as he drew back from one of these curious inspections. "He dangerous? Bah! he's nothing more than an ignorant tramp from the cattle regions, and no more a detective than I am!"

Would he have felt so positive, had he taken the trouble to examine the bonds which he had, back in that dark alley, applied to the wrists of the pretended cowboy?

From the first closing of the curtained windows, Dan Dunn had been at work, slowly, cautiously, systematically, his nerves too steady, his brain too clear to risk premature discovery by a single rash or hasty movement. Knowing that Don Fisher was driving them to the far-away bridge spanning the sluggish Kaw, he felt that there was plenty of time in which to effect his escape, provided Kit Melady did not show himself far more suspicious than he had thus far.

At each jar and jolt of the hack, Dan Dunn applied his strength of wrist to the cord that bound them, between times guardedly trying to work the knots loose or to slip one of his compressed hands through the hastily-applied loops.

In this feat he was helped not a little by the fact that Kit Melady had hardly believed it possible the detective could ever regain his full powers after that dastardly blow with the deadly sand-bag, and hence had taken little pains to draw either the loops or the knots particularly snug. If he had, with that soft, pliable, yet strong cord, no human strength or adroitness could have foiled it.

As it was, Dan Dunn did not succeed in getting his wrists fairly free until the busy streets were left behind them, and the level of the West Bottoms gained by the hack. And even then he did not see precisely how he was to get out of the carriage with life, unarmed as he was.

In perfect keeping with his other innocent errors of that night, Kit Melady himself pointed out a way.

He pushed aside the curtain to glance out and ascertain just how far they had won their way, and the brilliant electric lights from the Union Depot streamed in at the window, making the interior clear as if the noonday sun had suddenly burst forth in all its glory.

And by that light Dan Dunn, through his almost closed lids, caught sight of a sausage-like object lying across the knees of the tall crook, within easy reach of his own hands. It was the same sand-bag with which Kit Melady had felled him senseless to the ground, an hour or more before.

The curtain dropped, and for a single breath all inside seemed dark as pitch, through contrast. But then the dim red light returned, and through his partly-opened lids Dan Dunn could distinguish the deadly weapon still lying there, with Kit Melady's right hand touching it, not as though he felt there would be any occasion for its use, but more to keep the jarring, jolting of the hack from rolling it off his lap to the floor as they went bumping and grinding over the rails.

And then—with one hand Dan Dunn caught up the sand-bag, his other shooting straight for the throat of his unsuspecting enemy.

With a grip like a closing vise his fingers shut on the throat of the tall crook, stifling his cry of angry amazement. And swiftly, remorselessly the sand-bag fell upon his head, mashing flat his hat and seeming to shut his tall figure up as one closes a telescope.

"Sorry, but I had to do it, you know!" grimly chuckled the detective as, with one elbow, he pushed aside the thick curtain long enough to let a flash of light fall athwart the face of his recent guardian.

That was enough. He saw that his aim and stroke had both been sure. If not slain outright, Kit Melady was beyond the power of giving him trouble, either in his own person or by alarming Don Fisher on the driver's seat.

"It's a mighty poor rule that won't work both ways, they say, and I reckon it's a mighty poor weapon that won't buck against its master, if the wrong hands get hold of it!"

Dropping the sand-bag as of no further use just then, Dan Dunn, still with one hand propping the tall crook in his corner, ready to instantly close on his windpipe in case of an attempted outcry, slipped the silken muffler from his own face, to quickly and deftly adjust it over the face of Kit Melady, merely leaving his staring eyes in view. And then, having the use of both his hands once more, the cowboy detective unknotted the cord with which his own wrists had been confined, to apply it with greater care to the hands of his conquered captor.

"You'll need help to get that off, I'm open to bet odds, Kit, my noble rascal!" with a low, grim laugh as he completed the task. "Now for a leaf from your own book, dear boy."

With deft skill Dan Dunn searched the person of his helpless enemy, emptying every pocket without scruple, laughing softly as he found his own money-belt, heavy with the counterfeit coin which he had prepared as a lure to Brocky Sam, rather than Kit Melady.

"It may still come into play, and then there's no use in telling them too plainly what I am,"

he muttered, securing the belt beneath his clothes. "And now—shall I?"

His eyes instinctively turned in the direction of the driver's seat, though of course Don Fisher was invisible to his sight. For a few moments he seemed in doubt, but then shook his head negatively.

"Not this round, my burly rascal. I could do it—and I would, only I reckon it'll give you a greater scare to let you run your rope to the end. Don't I wish I could be near enough to see your sweet mug when you open the door for Kistsie, though!"

He laughed again at the grim thought, but then pushed aside the heavy curtain peering out into the night.

They had just passed by the State Line Depot, and though the light was bright enough, he knew that the time for his next move was at hand.

"We'll soon be crossing the rails, and that's my time, for rocks."

He propped the tall crook in one corner, laying the sand-bag on his lap, then silently turned the handle, opening the door just a trifle to be in readiness for the final move.

This was not long delayed. The hack struck its wheels sharply against the steel rails, over which they had to pass at an angle, making the hack swing and sway, the springs and wheels making plenty of noise under cover of which the detective hoped to complete his little mystification, at the same time making his escape good.

Watching his chance, Dan Dunn opened the door and stepped out, the swaying of the carriage preventing the driver from noticing the loss of his passenger. He deftly closed and fastened the door, then stood still for a brief space, laughing silently as he watched Don Fisher drive unsuspectingly onward, murmuring:

"It's a thousand pities to lose the best part of the circus, but I can imagine pretty well what it will amount to, after all. And then, I've got business of greater importance on hand. Sorry, but—The foul fiend be with you, gentlemen!"

Not until Dan Dunn turned his back on the rapidly-vanishing hack did he fairly begin to realize what it means to receive such an ugly blow as had been his. Until now, excitement and the thoughts of escape from death in the horrible form prescribed by Kit Melady had dulled his senses in this direction; but now his head began to throb and ache with blinding fierceness.

"That settles it!" he muttered, as he walked unsteadily toward the State Line Depot. "I've got too big a head on me for work to-night."

Hailing a hack, he bade the driver take him to the Hotel Brunswick.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FIRST TURN OF THE SCREW.

THOUGH feeling somewhat stiff and sore from the effects of his awkward fall from his carriage, Stuart Meredith was down-town at his office the next morning, punctually on time. To a certain degree he was a slave to habit, and it would call for more than a few cuts and bruises to make him break away from his regular routine.

He was alone in his richly furnished office, when a gentle tap sounded at his outer door, and before he could fairly turn in his seat, the barrier opened and Nicol Faulkner entered, gravely smiling, bowing his apologies even before his glib tongue could utter:

"Let my great anxiety to assure myself you are not much the worse for that unfortunate accident, dear Mr. Meredith, excuse my audacity. I would have sent in my name, with the usual ceremony, only I feared you might be too busy or otherwise disinclined to receive callers."

"I am feeling very well, sir," stiffly responded the nabob, gingerly accepting the proffered hand.

"And I am delighted to hear it, as well as to believe the evidence of my own eyes," bowed the young broker, warmly pressing the thin, cold hand that lay responseless and limp in his own palm. "I trust Miss Meredith has entirely recovered from the terrible shock?"

The old gentleman bowed, silently. Despite his coldness, the keen-eyed broker saw that he was secretly ill at ease, and a reddish glitter leaped into his dark eyes as he dropped the bony fingers with a parting pressure, sinking gracefully into a seat, though the nabob gave no signs of wishing that interview prolonged. Just the contrary, in fact, since he was ordinarily glad enough to see and welcome this rising young light among the elect.

But Nicol Faulkner had paid this call with a distinct purpose in view, and no common rebuff could make him beat a retreat.

"I called last evening to ask after Miss Meredith, and you, sir," he added, his tones low and seemingly shaken by strong emotions. "I could not wait longer to assure myself that neither of those whom I so highly respect and esteem, had suffered serious harm through my unlucky brute—whom, by the way, I have ordered sold at once."

"He should have been killed, the clumsy brute!"

Nicol Faulkner bowed in silence, but it was only to hide the ugly glow which filled his dark eyes at that rude, insolent tone.

"It is not too late for that, if you really think it necessary, my dear sir," he said, meekly.

So humbly, in fact, that Stuart Meredith was wholly disarmed. And there was more of his usual cordiality in his voice and manner as he uttered:

"Never mind. Selling will answer, I suppose. He should fetch a neat little sum, if the buyer takes him on his mere looks."

"I paid five hundred for him, but I never gave thought to that when I told my man to dispose of him. If the penalty was going afoot all my life, I could never bring myself to mount him after—after so nearly causing the death of your daughter."

"Mr. Meredith," his voice unsteady, his face flushing and then paling. "You cannot imagine what a horrible, frightful night I have passed! Over and over again I was forced to live through those horrible moments, when I felt that the one—that Miss Meredith must surely be killed! If she had—I would have leaped to death after her!"

If acting, the young broker was certainly "doing himself proud!"

Stuart Meredith shifted uneasily on his seat, casting furtive glances from the face of his visitor to the door, his hand instinctively moving toward the little button beside his desk, a touch on which would summon his servant instantly. By instinct he realized what must be the outcome of this scene. He felt that Nicol Faulkner had not come there simply to ask after his health. And in his heart he felt a certain degree of compunction, for he could not deny that he had, of late, rather encouraged the ambitious hopes of this rising young fellow!

Agitated as he seemed, Nicol Faulkner was keen-eyed enough to detect that involuntary movement toward the electric annunciator, and quickly moving his chair nearer the old gentleman, he caught his hand between his own, speaking rapidly, earnestly:

"Though I have long known I loved your charming daughter, Mr. Meredith, never until I had so nearly lost her through a frightful accident did I fully realize how precious she was to my heart. Never until then did I suspect what life would be without her presence to make it perfect! And so—I ask you to give her to me, for my wife!"

Mr. Meredith feebly tried to free his hand, but Nicol Faulkner, playing a part though he might be, was too deeply in earnest to permit this. If possible he would win a decided answer before the nabob could bring about an interruption.

"It is awfully presumptuous in me, of course, asking you to bestow such an inestimable treasure, but so it would be were the richest, most powerful in the land to ask the same great favor, my dear sir," he hurriedly added, holding the bony fingers tightly, his dark eyes fixed on that pale face, secretly noting its growing uneasiness, and thereby steeling himself against what he felt must speedily come to the surface. "I know that I am not nearly worthy such an angel, but—"

"I cannot give my consent, Mr. Faulkner."

Cold, almost harshly came the interruption as the rich man collected his momentarily scattered energies, to face the inevitable with something of his usual stiff reserve.

Nicol Faulkner dropped the hand he was pressing so warmly, and though he had expected nothing less than denial, after what he discovered on the evening last past, his hot rage showed itself in his deeply flushing face, in his brightly glittering eyes.

But he made no immediate reply. Though he believed he held a most potent argument in reserve, he was reluctant to "make use of it while even the ghost of a chance remained by which he might gain his coveted ends without too clearly showing his hand. And by a desperate effort of will he succeeded in holding his anger under control.

"May I ask why not, Mr. Meredith? Is it through any fault or failing of my own? Is it because I am not rich, measured by your standard? Or is it simply because you think I am unworthy, in my own person?"

Stiff, cold, reserved, once more fairly his customary self, the capitalist listened to these rapid sentences, openly meeting that glowing gaze without betraying any of his former uneasiness.

"There is no need for many words, Mr. Faulkner," he said, deliberately. "Let it suffice that you are too late. My daughter is already affianced, with my full consent."

Despite himself, Nicol Faulkner started back, with difficulty smothering a hot curse in its birth. Even while facing the worst, he had not once believed matters could have gone this far.

"But I understood—I am sure you gave me some little encouragement, only this very week!" he panted, hoarsely.

"Calm yourself, Mr. Faulkner," coldly uttered the nabob, delicately toying with a pearl-handled paper-cutter. "I hardly think you fully realize the nature of your words."

The young broker drew himself erect, tossing back his head with a short, harsh laugh. Now that he knew the worst, he was ready to take the offensive without further parley.

"I wish I could look at it in the same light with you, Mr. Meredith. Mayhap it would make my tumble a little easier. Even now, if you can look me in the eye and frankly declare that you have never given me cause for entertaining hopes—never permitted me to think you were ready to smile upon my suit—to grant me full permission to woo and win your daughter's love and hand in marriage—then I will say no more, but meekly bow to the inevitable and take my leave. Will you—can you give me this assurance, sir?"

Stuart Meredith rose from his chair, cold and stern, his sunken eyes flashing with a steady fire as he uttered:

"Allow me to bid you good-day, Mr. Faulkner. Shall I ring for my servant to show you the way to the street?"

Nicol Faulkner laughed shortly, sinking back in his chair while smiling scornfully up into that thin face.

"I wouldn't go quite that far, my dear sir. If you should—well, the morning papers would sparkle with a still greater sensation than graced their pages this day."

"Do you dare to threaten me in my own office?"

"Not yet, though it may even come to that before the end, unless you simmer down and act at least half-way white," sneered Faulkner. "I came here for a full and perfect understanding, and if I don't get it, I'll at least have the grim satisfaction of knowing that you are following your nose straight to a prison cell!"

For a moment the old man stood as though petrified by this amazing insolence, but then his face flushed hotly, one hand rose to his throat and he staggered back, to strike against and fall into his chair.

Without moving from his insolent attitude, Nicol Faulkner watched his movements, and laughed softly as, with a desperate effort, Meredith partially regained his composure. Then he added:

"As I said, I called at your house last evening, for the purpose of inquiring for your and your lovely daughter's health. I was refused admission by your servant, who said Miss Linnet was too ill to receive anybody. I took my departure, only to see, within five minutes, Eric Alvord admitted where I had been refused. Am I right in guessing that he is the happy man to whom you have pledged your daughter's hand?"

"I deny your right to ask, but nevertheless I will reply," coldly uttered the old gentleman. "You are right. My daughter has promised to become the wife of Eric Alvord, and I have given my free consent to their union. And now—oblige me by taking your leave."

"Presently, my dear sir," bowed Faulkner, without arising. "Sorry you seem so harsh, but you've got to see that young shyster and take back the promise you gave him!"

"Are you mad?" harshly ejaculated Meredith, flushing hotly with indignation. "If not—then you must be drunk!"

"Neither one nor the other, my dear fellow," laughed Faulkner, his handsome face taking on an actually ugly expression as he suddenly leaned forward, speaking swiftly: "I say, you must take back your promise to Eric Alvord! I say you must put a stop to all this nonsense, or else—well, there will be a most delightful skeleton at the bridal!"

For a brief space Stuart Meredith stared blankly at the audacious villain, unable to trust the evidence of his own senses. Surely the fellow must either be mad or intoxicated!

Then his proud nature broke bonds, and rising to his feet he cried:

"Leave this office, you pitiful scoundrel! Leave me at once, or I'll summon my porter to aid your exit at the toe of his boot!"

Nicol Faulkner also rose to his feet, but he showed no signs of an intention to obey this stern order. His face was pale, but it showed no signs of weakness other than that. His dark eyes glowed redly, and seemed to scorch the face upon which they rested.

"You dare to threaten me with such an indignity? You dare talk of having me kicked from your high and mighty presence as though I were the vilest of the vile? You—you?"

Then, with startling coolness, he sunk back in his chair, one white hand languidly waving permission in unison with his tongue:

"Very well, my dear sir! Call your porter. Bid him gently insert the toe of his brogans underneath my coat-tails. And while he is thus comically engaged, I'll see how he appreciates a brief synopsis of that little Lapier Tostivan affair of a generation since!"

Once more Stuart Meredith seemed struck by a spell, standing as though suddenly petrified, his eyes almost starting from their sockets as they glared at that pale, devilishly smiling face before him.

And then, still laughing in vicious mockery, Nicol Faulkner drew himself erect in his chair, twisting his head to one side, making a horribly significant motion with his hand under his left ear, apparently drawing a slip noose tightly about his neck!

With a choking, gasping groan, the old man staggered back, sinking heavily into his chair,

his face turning fairly livid, his breath short and rasping, with every symptom of an apoplectic stroke!

CHAPTER XIX.

BROCKY SAM GROWS SPHINX-LIKE.

NICOL FAULKNER laughed mockingly as he saw this, but as the nabob failed to rally as quickly as from the first shock, his views altered and a chilling fear assailed him.

What if his blow had been too brutally delivered? What if the rich man should never rally from that shock? What if it was in-leed death that was changing his face so frightfully?

With a startled cry that was almost a curse at his own folly, the young broker sprang from his chair, tearing loose the stiff collar and opening the shirt about the throat of the helpless man. He sprang across the room and drew a glass of water, to dash it violently into Stuart Meredith's face. From the curious little side-board he procured a glass of strong brandy and with the dampened head supported against his own shoulder, he managed to pour a few drops of the powerful liquor into the mouth of the stricken nabob.

All this with almost frantic speed, and a long breath of intense relief parted his lips as he felt the retired banker give a shivering gasp and mutter some indistinct words.

He stepped back to gain a clearer view of his face, and instantly recognized that, whatever might have been the case but for his energetic actions, the crisis was favorably past. Already Stuart Meredith was giving signs of regaining his briefly lost senses.

And when, a few moments later, the old man glanced around the room with an air of faint bewilderment, it was to see Nicol Faulkner quietly seated before him, a half-mocking smile upon his handsome face.

Now that he felt assured there was no immediate danger, Faulkner had no notion of granting his adversary time and opportunity for arming himself to resist his ends, and in his smoothest, silkiest tones he spoke up quickly:

"You were taken ill, I fear, my dear sir, a moment ago. I have taken the liberty of pouring you a glass of brandy. Perhaps it would be as well to strengthen yourself—for I had not nearly finished when you so unfortunately were taken with a rush of blood to the head."

During his first words Stuart Meredith stared vacantly at the speaker, plainly at a loss for comprehension, but then a purple flush convulsed his thin face and he muttered, thickly:

"You—you insolent scoundrel! I thought—leave this room!"

"To send Chief Speers or some of his gray-fleeced lambs to take my place?" sneered Faulkner, all tinge of compunctions vanishing before those words. "Don't be a bigger fool than nature, improved by cultivation, made you, my dear sir! I'll make a long-sight better friend and ally than enemy. If you insist on having my room instead of my company, of course I'll have to comply, since you pay the rent. But—if I am kicked out, literally or metaphorically, it will be to return with a warrant-armed policeman inside of an hour!"

Stuart Meredith gave a low groan, subsiding in his chair as though every nerve and muscle had suddenly given way.

Nicol Faulkner laughed mockingly at this new exhibition of weakness, which he apparently thought was far more mental than physical.

"I knew you wouldn't be so cruel, after taking a second thought, my dear father-in-law that is to be!"

"Never! ten thousand times never!" gasped the old man, with a flash of his former spirit returning, though his trembling limbs refused to support his weight as he tried to leave his chair.

"Once never would be a big plenty, don't you think?" mocked Faulkner, though his dark eyes again caught a lurid glitter that told of hot and deadly passions lying back of his pretended unconcern. "I'm afraid your poor brain is not quite as clear as it should be, with so much at stake, my dear sir. I beg of you to empty the glass at your elbow. I did not say touch the annunciator, but if you will have it that way—now it's talk with the bark on!" he flashed, as that trembling finger pressed on the electric button.

"Send your man away when he comes—or I'll give him a message. If not, I swear to you that I'll hire a crier to parade the streets with a big bell and call aloud the whole history of Lapier Tostivan!"

There was time for no further speech, for already the swift steps of the porter were heard at the door, followed by a rapid tapping on the panels. One glance at the pale, terror-stricken face of the nabob decided Faulkner, and he sprang across the room, opening the door and barring the entrance of the servant, briskly uttering:

"All right, my good fellow! Just send a messenger up to Belle View to bring a report as to the state of Miss Meredith's health, will you?"

He slipped a coin into the willing palm, then closed the door behind the unsuspecting fellow. Resuming his seat, he gazed steadily into the

still strongly agitated face of his victim, speaking coldly:

"I've given you another chance, Mr. Meredith, and if you are at all the wise man people credit you with being, you will never again run such a bitter black risk!"

"You are insolent! I don't understand you, sir!" faltered the old man, with a truly pitiful assumption of his usual hauteur.

"That shall not be my fault, if you will only be good enough to listen a few moments longer, Mr. Meredith," was the calm retort. "You forced me into using a weapon which I sincerely hoped to get along without. As I hinted, you had much better accept me for a friend and ally, rather than turn me into an open enemy. You can, if you will."

He paused for an instant, as though expecting a reply of some sort, but Stuart Meredith seemed too severely shaken to give one. Pale, ill, trembling in every fiber, he could only helplessly stare at his merciless tormentor.

"I say this, quite as much for the sake of your daughter, as for my own, I trust you will understand, Mr. Meredith. I love her with every fiber of my being! I love her far too madly to sit idle while another man carries off the prize I was led to think, by you, sir, might in the end be won by myself. You gave me plain encouragement. You led me to believe that I was in a fair way to win on my own merits. Now—you say you have pledged her hand to another! And yet you seem greatly surprised that I should—to use the vernacular—*kick!*"

Stuart Meredith was all this while striving to recover his bodily and mental powers, but he was not yet capable of speaking with sufficient promptness or decision to check the young broker.

"I love your daughter, sir, so intensely, so wholly, that I am content to overlook much more than many a worse young man might. I love her so madly that I am willing to take her hand, leaving her heart to follow after in its own good time. I am willing to bury the past; to forget all that happened so many years ago, as well as the words which your obstinacy forced me to utter but a few minutes since. In plainer words, Mr. Meredith, I will help you to bury that Tostivan affair too deep for resurrection this side of the crack of doom!"

"I do not understand your meaning, Nicol Faulkner," slowly, painfully uttered the old man, showing a nerve that fairly amazed the young broker, it was so wholly unexpected. "If I was not so feeble—so sorely shaken by the accident which you brought about with your own clumsiness, sir—I would throw you into the street by way of the window, sir!"

"A pretty fair bluff, but it won't win against the hand I hold," mockingly retorted the broker, rising to his feet. "You lie when you say that my meaning is incomprehensible. You know that I hold a noose over your head, which I can fit about your neck if I am driven that far; but you try to believe I will never dare go that far."

"I will not, unless I am compelled. I will never make use of my power, if you are wise and content to meet me half-way. But I swear to you by all that mankind holds sacred! unless you turn Eric Alvord off inside of two days, and promise me the hand of your daughter in marriage before this month expires, I will publish everything to the world, and put cold iron about those dainty hands of yours!"

"Think this all over, please. I don't want to crowd you too hard. I'll grant you fair time for weighing the matter carefully before arriving at a final decision. I will call at Belle View this evening, to receive your decision. And if I am again denied admittance, I'll know what step to take next. And there will be a rare sensation for the papers to offer their readers over breakfast!"

Bowing low, after a mocking fashion, Nicol Faulkner, without waiting for a response, turned and left the room, running lightly downstairs, schooling his handsome face while so doing, and stepping on the pavement with his usual bland, winning smile.

He almost ran against a burly figure in waiting, and gave a little start as he recognized his visitor of the last past evening, Brocky Sam.

"Wasn't looking for a man of my size, boss?" chuckled the pock-marked rascal, his little eyes sparkling under their shaggy brows. "But it's me, all the same, waiting to hear how the game is going!"

"All right, I think," was the hurried response, as the broker cast an uneasy glance around them. "But this isn't a place—"

"Don't I know that? We'll just step inside this hack, and take a little whirl through town," laughed Brocky Sam, making a signal which was answered by the driver alighting and opening the door of his carriage, touching his hat as he apparently recognized the broker.

As though confident that no opposition would be offered, Brocky Sam stepped inside. Nicol Faulkner, after a barely perceptible hesitation, followed after. The door was closed, the driver mounted to his seat, driving briskly away without seeming to require any directions.

"He's all right, boss," nodded the burly ruf-

fian in answer to the inquiring glance which Faulkner gave him. "I've had him in waiting ever since you went up to beard the lion in his den. Now—how did you fare, anyway?"

Nicol Faulkner gave a terse synopsis of his interview with the Nabob of Quality Hill, concealing nothing. It apparently hugely pleased the stout rascal, judging from his malicious chuckles and rapid rubbing of his horny palms together.

"And now, Samuel, what does it all mean?" a little sternly demanded the young broker, one hand firmly gripping his companion by the arm. "I stuck close to your directions, and I could see they hit the old man mighty hard. But—what is this mighty secret? Who is or was Lapiet Tostivan? Why should the bare mention of his name almost throw Stuart Meredith into an apoplectic fit? Tell me that, will you?"

"Don't you be so impatient, lad," nodded Brocky Sam, his massive jaws squaring a little more than ordinary. "Can't you rest content with eating the fruit I'm helping you to shake out of the tree?"

"I don't like to work in the dark, though."

"What matter, so long as you get there?" with a lighter laugh. "And we're making the running at a gay old pace, too. I expected the stiff-necked old rascal to make a heap harder fight than this."

"He may rally, even yet," with a sudden frown. "He got pretty well shaken up by his fall, yesterday, remember. And you made me grant him time enough to think it all over. He'll fight harder to-night, unless you give me a clearer idea just how to meet all his crooks and turns. Curse the street!" he grated, as the hack jolted heavily. "This is no place to talk. Why not go to my office? Where is the fellow taking us to, anyway?" as he cast a glance through the open window.

"To call on a lady," laughed Brocky Sam, plainly enjoying himself. "And that reminds me," he hastily added before Nicol Faulkner could interrupt him. "You're a bit of a lawyer, as well as a real estate agent. Tell me how many wives can a man have here in Missouri?"

"What do you mean?" ejaculated the young man, in surprise.

"Exactly what I say: how many legal wives can a man have here?"

"One, of course, as you know well enough," snapped Faulkner, beginning to feel as though this burly rascal was playing with him.

"I thought as much, but there's nothing like being perfectly sure you're right before going ahead, you know. Now this lady—"

"Who is she?"

"Mrs. Eric Alvord, the lawful wife of our nice young friend—no less!" quickly responded Brocky Sam, with a low, chuckling laugh.

CHAPTER XX.

AN UNEXPECTED OBSTRUCTION.

BROCKY SAM leaned back in his seat, grimly enjoying the sensation to which he had so adroitly led up, laughing softly at the look of utter bewilderment which overspread the countenance of his opposite.

Nicol Faulkner stared at the grizzled old sinner, open-eyed and open-mouthed, for the moment absolutely deprived of all power of speech by that startling assertion.

"You'd hardly think it, would ye?" grinned Brocky Sam, after a brief period of enjoyment.

"Wouldn't take the young shyster to be that sort o' cat? Yet it's sober truth—or if it isn't, I'd really like to know how he'll prove different when we fetch him face to face with his deserted frau—well, I just would, now."

Nicol Faulkner caught his breath with a sharp gasp.

"What the foul fiend do you mean, man? He's not married?"

"I'll make you think he is, sure for certain, boss!" chuckled the fellow, with a short nod of his head. "Didn't I gently hint that the very worst use you could put a man to was to hang him? Wouldn't you rather see the shyster brought face to face with his shamefully deserted wife, where the little lady could witness the scene? Eh, lad?"

While he was speaking Nicol Faulkner was using his eyes keenly, and now he began to see light. This was part of the cunning web which Brocky Sam had been spinning, but it seemed to him a useless waste of time and power.

"You mean that you've got a woman who stands ready to swear she is the deserted wife of young Alvord? Is that it, Sam?"

"So much like truth that before she's at the end of her story, I'm open to lay long odds she'll fully believe herself the most bitterly injured woman in seventeen States!" nodded the old fellow, chuckling.

For a brief space there was silence. Faulkner was thinking hard, and from his frowning brow and lip-biting it was plain enough those reflections were far from satisfying. And when he broke the silence his tongue confirmed his face.

"It's too risky, old man—entirely too risky! We couldn't carry it out to the end without laying ourselves open to the law, and when we

can win the game without running that risk, what's the use?"

"For one thing, to get nearer even with our precious friend, Eric Alvord. For another, to give the nabob a fair excuse for shaking one man to put another in his shoes. Do you want the little lady to know just how you are winning her hand in marriage? If you do, then you're heap bigger fool than I ever credited you with being."

"There is something in that," admitted Faulkner. "But how is it to be brought about? Do you mean to openly charge him with having a wife, or is it simply to throw dust in her eyes?"

Brocky Sam did not respond immediately. His chuckling ceased and he doubled his thick underlip between his thumb and forefinger, thrusting it between his tobacco-stained teeth, gnawing it slowly.

"Well," after a brief pause, "I haven't fully decided as to that. A good deal depends on how the woman I've picked out looks at the matter. If she's willing to go the whole hog, I'm ready with the papers and proof to back her up clean through!"

"Then this woman don't know your plans, as yet?" demanded Faulkner, in surprise.

"There'll be no difficulty on that score," laughed Brocky Sam, thrusting his grizzled head out at the window, to assure himself as to their present whereabouts. "She's a daisy, right from the meadow! What I say, she'll swear to, without turning a hair! And if I conclude to crowd the game from start to finish, she'll end up with making even the shyster himself believe she's his lawfully wedded wife!"

Nicol Faulkner was silent, but it was plain enough from his darkened countenance that he was not exactly satisfied with this new link in the chain Brocky Sam was forging. Somehow he could not believe such an audacious plot could be successfully carried out.

"It's a sort of double-header, you see," Brocky Sam condescended further to explain, when satisfied as to the progress the hackman was making through the crowded street. "If we see fit, we can run young Alvord behind the bars, and send him over the road without a bit of trouble or the slightest risk to ourselves. But if we decide that this will cost too much time, then we'll stick to the other tack."

"As I told you—and as I reckon you've seen for yourself, after what passed between the old gentleman and yourself, this morning—I've got a tight hold on him. I can make him squeal for mercy, whenever I see fit to close my grip. But—there's the little lady to bear in mind, don't you see?"

"You want to marry her, you say? All right! You shall have your own sweet will in that respect. But wouldn't you rather have a wife without a skeleton in her closet? Do you want a wife who loves another man from top to toe?"

"Then my plan will help you rub out her fancy for Alvord. And it will give her pap a good excuse for kicking the young upstart out of his house—don't you see?"

"But if he denies it?"

"If we take that tack, he needn't know anything about the real cause of his expulsion," laughed Brocky Sam, who was plainly deeply in love with this part of his schemes. "But we'll finish talking the matter over where talking comes easier than in a hack on this wretched side-street. We're almost there!"

By this time the hack had left Main street far behind, and gained a part of the East Side where the buildings were more widely scattered, with an occasional vacant lot in all its unattractiveness. The driver drew rein before a dingy two-story brick house, standing quite a distance back from the street, presenting anything but a handsome appearance. The dull gray blinds were tightly closed, and the entire place bore an air of being uninhabited.

Brocky Sam alighted first, a broad grin on his massive features as he noted the frown with which Nicol Faulkner regarded his surroundings, but he said nothing until after dismissing the hackman.

"It's not so much for pritty, boss, but it holds just what we want most right now: the smartest, keenest, coolest, nerviest woman this side o' monkey-heaven!"

"You will have your way, of course," growled Faulkner, crossing the dilapidated plank walk and entering the neglected grounds at the heels of his comrade. "But I don't like it. What's the use, when we can win our game without adding this particular risk?"

Brocky Sam vouchsafed no reply, for they were now at the front door, against the panels of which he beat a peculiar tattoo with his knuckles, ignoring the bell-handle which was conveniently near.

There was an unexpected delay about answering his summons, and not until a cautious movement of the blinds at the nearest window met their ears, was the door opened. By Belle Shado, her face pale and haggard, her dark eyes reddened as though through copious weeping.

"Seems to me you're mighty cautious, old girl!" growled Brocky Sam as he pressed his

way across the threshold, having to push back the door by main force. "Didn't you know it was one of the family, by the knocking? Come in, boss!"

As Nicol Faulkner crossed the threshold, Brocky Sam, with facetious ceremony, bent his burly figure, flinging out his huge hands toward each as he uttered:

"Mr. Faulkner, permit me to introduce you to my particular friend, Mrs. Eric Alvord! Mrs. Alvord—"

"What do you mean?" sharply demanded the woman, starting back.

"Business, Belle," laughed Brocky Sam, dropping into an easy chair, both hands sliding into his pockets as he leered knowingly into that pale face, to sharply utter: "What have you been trying to do with the two eyes o' ye, girl? You've been turning on the water-works?"

Belle Shado impatiently flung out one hand, ignoring his question.

"What do you mean, I ask, Sam Crossley? Why do you call me out of my name? Who is this gentleman, and why have you brought him to this house, just when— Will you speak, man alive?"

All trace of carelessness was gone now, as Brocky Sam straightened up in his seat, keenly scanning that pale, tear-marked face as though hoping to divine what her lips denied him. But Belle Shado coldly schooled her features, and he felt that he was wasting time for naught.

"All right, if you are in that sort of temper, my girl," he said, with a short nod. "I'm here on business. I brought this gentleman with me, partly to introduce him to the family, including yourself and the gentle Kit, who can—"

"Cut it short, will you?" sharply demanded the woman, her dark eyes glowing with poorly-concealed anger or uneasiness, it was no easy matter for even his keen wits to fully decide which.

"Short she am, Belle! I want you for a job, which will weigh down your pretty little hands with good golden coin. I want you to dress yourself up, in a style which may be to suit your own ideas of fitness, and call at a certain house, on a certain street, at a certain hour, where you will introduce yourself as Mrs. Eric Alvord, a deserted wife whose gay young hubby you have good cause to believe is flirting with matrimonial intent about a certain young lady, whose—"

"Are you crazy, or only drunk, Brocky Sam?"

"Neither the one nor the other, my good girl," was the prompt response, with the low addition: "Wish I could be just as certain about you!"

"Never bother your brain about me! Where were you yesterday and last night? Have you heard nothing about—is there no news stirring that closely concerns us?" her voice breaking unsteadily as she uttered those last words, her dark eyes fairly aglow with fire as she leaned forward to glean from his face the answer he might see fit to disguise.

But she caught her breath with a gasp, as she read only blank surprise in that broad face.

"Where was I?" he echoed, thoroughly puzzled, as well as a little uneasy, by this wholly unexpected reception. "Down-town. News? None that can cause you to wear such a death's-head look as that, anyway!"

Shady Belle sunk back in her chair, white and trembling, her lithe figure shivering with strong emotion. For a moment her dark eyes were closed, then they reopened and she spoke out quickly, passionately:

"You're up to some more evil work, Brocky Sam, but I'll have nothing whatever to do with it, though you could insure me gold-coin enough to fill this room from floor to ceiling! I'm done forever with crookedness! And if we pull through the next few days in safety, I'll shake the whole family—save one!"

"The gentle Kit, of course?" sneered the grim old sinner, plainly angry at finding this unexpected obstruction in the trail he had so carefully marked out.

"My husband, sir!" was the swift retort, as she drew her lithe figure proudly erect for an instant, but only to sink heavily back in her seat again, burying her haggard face in her hands, bitter sobs shaking her frame in every member.

"I reckon we'd better pull out, old man!" muttered Faulkner, in a guarded aside, but with a look of relief on his handsome face.

At least his wish was in a fair way of being gained; the dangerous plan shadowed forth by Brocky Sam would have to be abandoned, now!

But the old rascal impatiently shook off his touch, staring perplexedly at the weeping woman, trying in vain to divine the cause of her startling alteration in mind and manner.

"What's up, Belle, girl?" he at length uttered, seeing no signs of a letting-up in that flood of bitter grief. "Surely nothing can have happened to Kit? I heard of no racket down-town, and—"

Belle Shado uncovered her face, rising to her feet with a short, hard laugh that contrasted painfully with the hot tears still running copiously down her faded cheeks. She caught

Brocky Sam by the hand and fairly dragged him to the door, crossing the narrow hallway and passing up a flight of steps. He followed without resistance, without speaking a word, wholly interested in learning the cause of her strange manner.

"Look!" cried the woman, flinging open a chamber-door.

Pale and ghastly, Kit Melady lay stretched out on a bed!

CHAPTER XXI.

MAKING THE BEST OF IT.

BROCKY SAM gave vent to a low ejaculation, not wholly free from awe, as that still, corpse-like figure was revealed.

"Kit—who done it!" he muttered, hoarsely, recoiling a pace, his little eyes seeking an explanation from Belle Shado.

But the woman was no longer at his side. Dropping his arm she entered the chamber, sinking on her knees at the bedside, bowing her head with hands tightly clasped as though in the act of praying for her dead!

Nicol Faulkner, still reluctant, had felt forced to follow his comrade in evil, and saw all this over the broad shoulders of Brocky Sam. And now his hand gripped the pock-marked rascal almost savagely, and in barely audible tones he muttered in his ear:

"Let's get out of here, Sam! This part of the game is played out!"

But the old man rudely shook off his grasp, without removing his eyes from that pale, ghastly face.

It was turned slightly toward the door, giving him what might be called a three-quarter view. He could see the dark discolorations left about the eyes by the steel-like fists of Dan Dunn, and he caught himself shivering at the revolting thought that these were the first signs of coming decay.

Only for an instant. Then a low ejaculation broke from his lips as he strode swiftly into the room, bending over the bed to confirm the discovery his keen eyes had just made.

Kit Melady was not dead!

"Who done it, gal?" he muttered, one hand slightly shaking the woman, whose painful sobs were still audible, though smothered in the bed-clothing. "How did it come about? What makes him lie so deathlike?"

The term was well-chosen. Only for the slow, faint respiration, at times fairly imperceptible to the unaided eye, Kit Melady was the very image of a cold and stiffened corpse! Not a muscle quivered. Not the slightest change came into those glassy, half-bared eyes.

Belle Shado made no response, but from behind the bed, coming out of a cunningly contrived door in the shaded wall, appeared Don Fisher, a half-frightened grin on his rugged features as he met the startled gaze of Brocky Sam.

"A dirty piece o' business now, I tell ye!" he muttered, passing gingerly around the foot of the bed, casting a shy, scared, wondering look at that bruised face as he did so. "I'll tell ye what you've got to know. She's all broke up over Kit—poor girl!"

"Hasn't she got any one to look after him?"

As though his muttered words contained an electric shock, Belle Shado sprung to her feet, facing them as might a wounded panther the enemies of her young, motioning them to depart as she hoarsely cried:

"To sell him to the police? To run his neck into a noose, while he is still hovering on the brink of death! Get you gone, you devils! It's just such crooks as you two that's brought my dear love to such a wretched pass! Begone, I say, or I'll—I'll—"

"Simmer down, Belle, old girl," harshly interposed Brocky Sam, as he caught her uplifted hand, holding it tightly, gazing sternly into her grief-inflamed eyes as he added: "You can't kick up a bobbery without having Kit brought into the same racket, mind you! Tend to him, and don't try to ride a high horse over us. 'Tend to him, I tell you!" as he pushed her back toward the bed on which the man she claimed as a husband lay so still and ghastly.

"He's alive. Fetch him to!"

Turning, Brocky Sam left the chamber with Don Fisher and Nicol Faulkner, but before they had fairly regained the room into which Belle Shado had admitted them, that personage came hastily after, her face still damp with tears, but looking more natural than it had at any moment since she threw open the chamber door to reveal her seemingly dead husband.

"I was crazy, I reckon, Sam," she hurriedly apologized, in answer to his gaze of inquiry. "Think what he is to me, and what he looks like now! Think how awfully I have been shaken up! And I'm afraid to send out for a doctor, lest it end in bringing the bloodhounds after Kit!"

"What's he been doing? You needn't be afraid to speak out before him," noticing their doubtful glances toward Nicol Faulkner. "I'll go his bail, of course. Would I fetch any one here that couldn't be thoroughly trusted, think?"

The couple interchanged quick glances; and

Belle nodded to Don Fisher as though giving him permission to explain.

This the burly crook did, without further hesitation, speaking in short, curt sentences, but making all perfectly clear as he proceeded.

He told of how they "spotted" the seeming cowboy, and how Kit Meredith, the day before their final attempt at fleeing the stranger, had satisfied himself that he wore a well-stuffed money-belt about his person. He went on to tell how they two, aided by Darby Devine, tried to work the "dead brother racket" on the stranger, Kit Melady making up as a cowboy, the more naturally to play his part and win the sympathy of the seeming "cow-puncher."

Don Fisher was frank enough and honest enough to attempt no concealment, but he was really deceived himself, for he laid the fiasco entirely at the door of Eric Alvord.

"Only for that cursed law sharp, we'd have collared the boodle and pitched the sucker over the rocks as the shortest way of getting shut of him, you mind! But when he got the office—well, the fellow just wiped out the whole earth with the three o' us!"

"He's the devil—he's the worst bloodhound that ever cursed the earth!" hoarsely cried Belle Shado, with a shiver of mingled dread and bitter hatred as she cast a swift glance toward the windows.

"I don't think it, even yet," doggedly muttered Don Fisher, though his own countenance underwent a swift change. "He's just a wild and woolly tramp from the range—no more, no less!"

"And Kit?" asked Brocky Sam. "Did the fellow lay him out like that, just with his dukes?"

Don Fisher hastened to explain, as before concealing nothing of moment, from his standpoint. He said that, after having been driven from the crowd of curiosity-seekers about the wreck at the base of the bluff, they contrived to dog the pretended cowboy up-town, taking a hack and safely locating him with Eric Alvord. They sent Darby Devine with instructions to Shady Belle, they two keeping guard over their intended victim. He told of the manner in which Belle played decoy, and of all that followed up to the moment of his startling discovery on the Kaw River bridge.

"You could have knocked my brains out with a lump of hot butter, just then!" he grimly exclaimed. "Kit tumbled right into my arms, like a dead man. And devil a taste of the greeny could I find, inside or out the rigging."

"He's the devil himself, I tell you!" murmured Belle Shado.

"But how could he turn the trick?" scowled Brocky Sam, thoroughly perplexed by the strange affair. "You must have been drunk, or gone to sleep in the box, man!"

"I was never wider awake in all my life," doggedly declared Don Fisher, shaking his head. "All I know is that the trick was turned, and that without a sound loud enough to scare a weasel. But how he got his hands loose; how he managed to knock Kit on the head with the sand-bag and stiffen him out; how he left the hack after doing all this; I'll never tell you. All I know is that it was done."

"And poor Kit has never moved of his own accord since Don brought him back to me," said Belle Shado, her tones cold and hard, so great was the effort made by her to keep her painful emotions in check. "And so he will lie until that bloodhound comes with a warrant to drag him away to the pen!"

Brocky Sam shook his head, decidedly.

"I don't think there's any danger of that, my girl!"

"You don't know him as I do, then!" flashed the poor woman. "You are blind, like Don—as my poor man was, even when I swore to him that the demon was more than he seemed! And yet—haven't you heard tell of a human sleuth called the Soft-hand Sport?"

Brocky Sam gave vent to a startled cry, mingling with a vicious curse, staring at the speaker as though she had suddenly summoned up a ghost from the troubled past for his benefit.

"You don't mean to say that—"

"I do—I can take my oath to it, I tell you!" sharply interposed the woman. "I recognized him, last night, even as he recognized me and called me by name! He's no cowboy—he's Dan Dunn, the Soft-hand Sport! And he'll never give over until he runs us all in!"

For a brief space there was silence. Don Fisher looked puzzled. Nicol Faulkner fidgeted uneasily on his chair, furtively glancing toward the door, as though he wished himself well out of this scrape. But then Brocky Sam spoke up, briskly, positively:

"You'd ought to know, Belle, but say he is Dan Dunn; isn't it plain enough that he's hunting other game? If he was after us—if he really wanted to take Kit or Fisher—wouldn't he have run them in last night? Or, say that he wanted Don to discover the little joker on his own hook, wouldn't he have been ready to bag his game when it came back here? Would he let so long a time pass by without closing in? Of course he wouldn't, and so—he ain't going to

trouble us if we don't cross his track again—that's flat!"

Now that the matter was presented to her in this form, the woman really seemed to receive a ray of hope, though her anxiety concerning her "man" was still intense. And Brocky Sam, still clinging obstinately to his scheme, ignored the muttered hint from the young broker that they had better be going, and bore Belle company back to the bedside of the unconscious crook.

He gently examined him, noting where the deadly sand-bag had fallen across his skull, seeing nothing else to account for that strange stupor. It may be that he really believed what he said, but certain it is that his tones and manner were full of confidence as he declared that Kit would soon be himself again, provided Belle would allow him to send in a doctor to patch him up.

"I know a man who can keep a close tongue if paid for it. And if it is as you think, about this cursed detective, Soft-hand, all his talk couldn't do any harm. If he wants Kit, he knows where to lay hands on him, be sure of that! But you'll not be bothered, I'm confident."

Then he again broached the matter which had led to his present visit, but the woman flatly refused to even weigh the matter.

"I know something about the man you're striking at," she said, doggedly. "I know that he's the same man who interfered when Kit and the boys were trying to skin that demon. He must be a friend of Soft-hand, else he wouldn't have taken that risk, or had him at his office for so long afterward. Then—am I to play against him, while poor Kit is unable to run?"

All Brocky Sam could say had not the slightest effect. She was forever done with all crookedness. All she asked for was to bring her husband back to life and sense, then she would urge him to flee far from Kansas City, to live a different life for the future.

Sulkily the grim old sinner finally gave over his efforts, and with a last examination of the injured crook, which only confirmed his former opinion, he left the room, promising to send in a trusty and skillful physician to take charge at once.

With Nicol Faulkner only too eagerly bearing him company, Brocky Sam left the building, far less triumphant than when he had approached it, striding rapidly along over the rickety plank-walk.

For some little time the broker restrained his curiosity, waiting for his companion to volunteer an explanation, but then he asked:

"What does it all mean, anyway, man? Who is this Soft-hand Sport, as you call him? What has he got to do with our little game?"

"Don't bother!" sulkily growled the pock-marked rascal.

"But I want to know—I've a right to know everything!"

"You'll know just what I take a notion to tell you, young fellow!" scowled Brocky Sam, wheeling to face his companion. "Don't bother, I say. Play your hand, and we'll win, devil or no devil!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SOFT-HAND SPORT.

THOUGH it was late before he reached his rooms, and still later before sleep came to his eyes, Eric Alvord was up at his usual hour the morning after, as he told himself for the thousandth time, having been made the happiest man in all the world!

That as a matter of course! But all his marvelous happiness did not cause him to forget the appointment which he had made with Dan Dunn, his somewhat mysterious friend, and as soon as his breakfast was fairly over, the young lawyer made his way to the hill on which stood the Hotel Brunswick.

There are many larger hotels in Kansas City, at the present day, but none neater, more exclusive or better conducted than the Hotel Brunswick. But Eric Alvord had no eyes for the richly ornamented office, with frescoed walls and marble floor, as he entered. All he could see just then was a tall, graceful figure standing near the cigar-stand, smiling blandly in his direction.

The figure of a gentleman, garbed in rich, perfectly fitting clothes of the latest fashion. A face that seemed strangely like, yet unlike, that of the man whom he had last seen rigged out as a cowboy on a holiday!

"Good-morning, Alvord!" smiled this fashionable apparition, briskly advancing with extended hand. "You're rather earlier than I expected, but none the less welcome. Have a cigar?"

It was indeed Dan Dunn, but Dan Dunn changed from a chrysalis into a butterfly!

His long locks were gone, as was his shapely imperial. His curving mustaches had been trimmed, and were now waxed to a tiny point on each side of his red-lipped mouth. Even the tan seemed to have been removed by some magic influence from his face.

"Bottle it up, pard, until we're alone in my room," breathed the transfigured sport, barely audible, as he gripped the hand of the amazed

lawyer, adding in clearer tones: "Have a smoke—or, to save time, suppose they send up a box and a decanter, eh?"

With a word to that effect to the bowing lad, he drew the hand of his visitor through his arm, leaving the office and turning past the open door of the dining-room, to gain the wire-enclosed elevator. The boy in charge recognized him, and without waiting for instructions, set the machinery in motion, quickly reaching the second floor, where Dan Dunn led the way along a corridor to near its end.

Just before reaching the door of his room, it opened and a tall, white-haired, white-bearded gentleman emerged, stopping short as he recognized the Soft-hand Sport, and, as Eric Alvord fancied, showing a little embarrassment.

"Going for a stroll, this charming morning, eh?" lightly uttered Dan Dunn, smiling brightly. "Good enough! But don't wander too far away, please; there's a little bit of business I want to talk over—"

"Don't let me interfere with your arrangements," interposed Eric, hastily. "What little I have to say can wait until—"

"I'm not," laughed Dan Dunn, as he opened the door, standing aside for his friend to enter. "The whole day's before us, and the business I spoke of can be concluded at any time."

Closely following them came a black boy, bearing cigars, wine and glasses, with a spirit-lamp for lighting purposes. Dan Dunn dismissed him, grinning broadly over a silver dollar, then closed and locked the door behind him.

"Consider yourself my prisoner, pardner, until you've fully explained why your eyes are so remarkably bright this fair morning!" he said laughingly, as he came back to sink into a chair opposite his guest.

Alvord flushed, but it was more through pure joy than embarrassment. He felt doubly grateful to this peculiar friend of his. Only for the encouragement he had given, he knew he would not have the courage to press his suit—"crowd your game, pardner!" as Dan Dunn had tersely put it.

Already he was really anxious to confide in this handsome fellow; but Dan Dunn apparently was not yet ready to listen to his rhapsodies, for without pressing the point he had himself introduced, he began narrating his adventures of the past night.

Eric Alvord listened with breathless interest, now and then muttering threats against the audacious crew who had so nearly made way with his new-found friend.

"It is scandalous! I'll drop everything else to run them over the road!" he sternly cried as Dan Dunn finished describing how adroitly he had turned the tables on Kit Melady and Don Fisher.

The Soft-hand Sport suddenly grew cold and grave, as he uttered:

"No you won't, dear boy, though I thank you for feeling such a powerful interest in my concerns. I reckon I evened up matters pretty well. Kitsy gave me an abominable headache of my own, but I returned the compliment, and I'm open to lay long odds he's still in bed this fine morning. Then Don Fisher; well, if I didn't scare him out of his boots when he opened the door to find Kit had changed places with me, I'm 'way off my base."

"But such an abominable outrage!"

"Abominable enough, for a fact, but after all I'm little the worse for wear, and when one buckles against such trash, he must expect dirty fingers if no worse. And—I've got better use for Kitsy and company than running them into jail!"

After this, of course the lawyer could say nothing more. If the one most interested refused to prosecute, or even bring a charge against the crooks, he could do nothing in the matter.

"And now—about those eyes?" laughingly asked Dan Dunn, as they sat smoking and sipping their wine. "Of course you kept your appointment, and equally of course—"

"Thanks mainly to you!" reaching across the little table and firmly gripping his hand, his honest face aglow with great happiness.

In a few words, without, of course, entering fully into details, Eric told Dunn how his suit had prospered. He told how fully he had at first confessed his obscure parentage, and how nobly Linnet Meredith had responded. Then he came to the after-interview with the father.

"I can't find words to fitly describe the really noble manner in which he received me," the young man said, his tones growing slightly unsteady, something like moisture dimming his bright eyes for a moment. "I was braced for a tough fight, and would have counted myself very fortunate in escaping an order to instantly leave the house, lest he borrow aid from the servants in kicking me out," with a soft laugh at the idea, but with an undercurrent of truth in his speech for all. "Instead, he heard me out in silence, then took me by the hand and placed that of his daughter in it, blessing us both!"

Dan Dunn was listening in silence, his face grown cold and hard-set, his gray eyes glittering with a strange light which, for the first

time, the happy lover noticed. A look of hurt surprise came into his face as he did so, and he hastily muttered:

"I am boring you. I beg your pardon, for—"

Dan Dunn gripped his hand, checking his offer to rise.

"You don't read straight, pardner! I'm glad—more so than you would believe if I were to tell you in just so many words. I feel a very strong interest in this affair, as you ought to know, from my so earnestly urging you to crowd your game without a moment's delay."

"But—you were frowning so blackly, that I naturally—"

"Because I am still uneasy for fear something may turn up to cheat you out of your prize, after all," was the swift interposition. "Don't cut in, please. Let me have my little say-so, and if I say anything to sting you a bit, try to forget it until you come to read my meaning clearer."

He paused, brushing a hand lightly over his face. Eric watched him in silence, as bidden, but with a wondering, perplexed look in his eyes.

"It's hard to decide just what and how much to say, pardner," the Soft-hand Sport added, in slow, grave tones, his eyes seemingly trying to discount the feelings with which Eric would receive his words. "You're too smart not to see that I have some good reasons for urging you to haste in this matter. You'd know I was lying if I said my part was only that of an everyday friend. And yet—I can't tell you the whole truth just yet! Will you trust me a little longer?"

Their eyes met fairly, steadily, keenly for a brief space. Alvord grew a little paler, but when he spoke it was plainly enough:

"I will—I do trust you! And I'll try my level best to follow out the line you mark, so long as it does not touch her too closely."

"If you do, it will secure not only your future happiness, but that of your lady-love as well," promptly replied Dan Dunn, his face lightening up as he uttered the words.

"Don't trust too much to the manner in which Stuart Meredith received you. Don't trust him at all, if you can get along without it! But crowd your game all it'll stand! Marry the lady to-morrow, if you can win her consent!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"THERE'S MUSIC IN THE AIR!"

THOUGH he had been prepared for something a little out of the ordinary run, this speech startled Eric Alvord out of his usual self-possession.

"Why, one would almost think that you were charging Mr. Meredith with being not only a hypocrite, but a criminal!" he ejaculated.

"That is hardly reasonable, is it?" laughed the Soft-hand Sport, regaining his former easy, graceful manner. "And to you, the soon-to-be son-in-law of the high and mighty Nabob of Quality Hill?"

But Eric was not turned aside so easily. Gazing keenly into the face of his friend, trying to read there what his ears might be denied, he persisted:

"You have something against Mr. Meredith. You either know or you suspect something to his serious disadvantage. Now I remember your former words—how you asked me if sin or crime could turn me from my purpose to win her love!"

"And your answer now would be the same as then, of course?"

"You know that, Dunn. I love her for herself alone. But tell me what it is you are holding back! Tell me—"

"You can't make too sure of a good thing, pardner!" with a brief return of the cowboy in his tones and laugh. "Isn't that plenty reason for my advice?"

Eric slowly shook his head, the look of trouble deepening on his honest face. He felt that this strange man must be in error, but if he refused to speak out plainly, what chance had he to set him aright?

Dan Dunn watched him through the blue curls of smoke, and apparently he could read his thoughts, for, after a brief silence, he remarked:

"You think I'm prejudiced against Mr. Meredith, yet I'm going to ask you a favor, dear boy: will you give me an introduction to the old gentleman?"

It was a simple question, but one that Eric Alvord found it hard to answer promptly. What was to follow this introduction? What object had Dan Dunn to gain from—

"Of course, if you have any good reason for declining, that settles the matter," quietly added the Soft-hand Sport.

Alvord muttered something about giving him the introduction, with pleasure, and the detective bowed gravely.

"Somehow you have taken it into your head that I am an enemy to the father of the lady you love, Mr. Alvord. I did not intend giving you that impression, but since it has come about, I'll just say this much for your future pondering:

"Bend all your energies to hastening the

marriage between Miss Meredith and yourself. Urge her to name as early a day as possible, and assure her that in good time you will give her ample reasons for so doing. And don't place too much trust or confidence in the old gentleman. If he saw a point to be won that way, he would throw you over without a single compunction. Don't you know that much, pardner?"

"I know that he has been called tricky in business matters, but—"

"What all the world says is mighty apt to prove true at the bottom," laughed Dan Dunn, filling both glasses with wine. "Anyway, with such a glorious prize in view, you're hardly wise if you refuse to win it as soon as possible."

The young lawyer was far from satisfied, but something in the manner of the detective kept him from further effort to get at the bottom of what he felt by instinct was a mystery which, by concerning Linnet, through her father, also very nearly concerned him.

Dan Dunn regarded him closely for a few moments, while slowly sipping his wine, a gravely troubled light in his gray eyes.

"I am sorry you have taken this idea into your head so soon, Alvord," he at length uttered, something of that same trouble in his tones. "I knew it must come before long, but—well, what is to be will be!" with a toss of his head as though throwing off all care with that fatalistic proverb.

"When I saw you down in the Bald Knob country, Dunn, you were acting as a detective. Are you in the same business now?"

"In other words: am I piping the nabob?" laughed Dunn, easily. "You must judge for yourself, dear boy. I do not even ask you to promise not to drop a word of warning where you may think it will do the most good. All I say is this: if I am shadowing your friend, would I have spoken so frankly to you about it, unless I had everything working my own way? If I did not know that escape was simply impossible, would I give you free leave to warn the game? This, mind you, on your assumption that I am really a detective, piping Stuart Meredith, neither of which points I have admitted."

"I give it up!" muttered Eric Alvord, vainly trying to follow his real meaning through this rapid involution of words.

"Thanks!" bowed the Soft-hand Sport, with a low, mellow laugh. "Precisely what I was in hopes of bringing about!"

It was a far from satisfactory conclusion, and Eric Alvord felt not a little cast down in heart as he gave over all attempt to win any clearer light on the subject against the will of this glib-tongued man.

On the other hand, Dan Dunn seemed perfectly at ease, and apparently felt that whatever little cloud had arisen between them had been banished after an entirely satisfactory fashion.

There was a little further talk over their cigars and wine, but nothing concerning this record sufficiently near to call for reproduction. And half an hour later the two young men were leaving the hotel, arm in arm, apparently on the best of terms with each other, bound for down-town.

"Isn't it rather early in the day to think of finding the magnate down-town?" asked Dan Dunn, with a careless glance up at the gray front of Coates's Opera House, before which they were just then passing.

"Not at all. Mr. Meredith sets a good example for many a younger and poorer business man. As a rule, eight o'clock finds him at his office, rain or shine."

"Then we'll drop in on him, if you have no particular objections. I've half made up my mind to gather my little lump of money, to dump it into this wonderful boom! One might as well be dead as out of the swim."

"You might well put it to a worse use," with a faint touch of the enthusiasm which is such a striking trait of all who have lived for any length of time in the Magic City. "And I don't know of a man who could give you better advice than Stuart Meredith. I only wish you were in earnest," with sudden gravity, as he stole a side-glance into the handsome countenance of his companion. "I only wish that was your sole reason for seeking this introduction."

"Play it was, and let it go at that, pardner!" smiled Dan Dunn.

That was the only allusion made of a personal nature during their walk. Dan Dunn showed no little curiosity in what was to be seen, asking questions and keeping Alvord pretty busy giving him the desired information, though more than once the thought struck the young lawyer that this was only an excuse to keep him from venturing on tender subjects again. For, with all his questions, Dan Dunn did not seem to be an entire stranger to the city.

They reached the huge building in which, among scores of lesser lights, the Nabob of Quality Hill had office rooms, without meeting with anything deserving particular mention. Eric led the way to the floor on which Meredith had rooms, followed closely by the detective. But his quiet signal on the door was answered by the porter with a negative shake of his head.

"Not down yet, Marsey?" in a tone of surprise.

"Gone home, sir, not feelin' any too well, I'm afeard," was the quiet response, but with a peculiar look on his wrinkled face that instantly attracted the attention of the detective.

"Nothing serious, I hope?" he asked, his tones soft and silken, as he stepped across the threshold.

"Well, I ain't none so sure o' that, neither, sir," and the porter rubbed his red nose dubiously. "He looked like a mighty sick man when I helped him down to the cab, but—an' him as bright an' chipper an' spry as a yearlin' when he come to the office this mornin', too."

While the honest fellow was rattling this off, Dan Dunn made a covert signal which Eric Alvord had little difficulty in interpreting aright, when taken in connection with the entrance past the janitor. Dan Dunn felt that a mystery of some sort was lying back of this sudden attack of illness, and he wanted to investigate further.

"That is too bad!" the young lawyer uttered, with real concern written on his face and sounding in his tones. "It gives me quite a shock! And—may I sit down a bit, Marsey?"

The porter stepped quickly aside, with a touch of embarrassment. He knew the young lawyer well by sight, and had more than once showed him in at the request of the nabob.

"Beg pardon, sir, but it's muddled up my poor brain that bad—I didn't notice that I was blockin' the way—hope you'll overlook my clumsiness, sir."

"Don't mention it, Marsey!" with a wave of his hand as he entered the office and took a seat. "How long ago did this happen? It is early yet, and we were not quite certain Mr. Meredith would have got down-town before us."

"He was here earlier than common, if I may be allowed to say as much 'bout a gent as might be used fer to regulate the sun, so to speak, sir! An' it's been the biggest part of an hour, sir, since he went back home, sayin' he was too sick fer business. An' him so bright an'—"

"What appeared to be the matter with him? Do you think it could have been the effects of his fall from the carriage yesterday?"

"No, sir. Leastwise, when he come, sir, I axed how was his health, an' took the liberty fer to hint that I hoped he wasn't any the wuss o' the accident—which you might 'a' knocked me down with a feather when I read it in the papers, sir!"

"And Mr. Meredith said—?" persisted Alvord.

"That it hadn't even shaken him up, sir."

"There was no message—no word from his home?"

The porter shook his head negatively.

"Not a message, sir, an' only one visitor afore he was tuck."

"And that visitor? You knew him?" drawled Dan Dunn, easily.

"Mr. Nicol Faulkner, sir, which 'most everybody knows him, sir."

Dan Dunn rose from his chair, saying, lightly:

"Of course he had nothing to do with it. It must have been from that fall, after all. Shall we go and learn how he is feeling now, Alvord?" his eyes bidding the young lawyer assent without further words.

Together they left the room and passed down to the busy street in silence, both looking grave and thoughtful, but Dan Dunn particularly so. And unless the bright light was at fault, there was a strange glow lying back in his eyes as they turned down the street.

Before they had reached the nearest corner, they came almost in contact with two other pedestrians, Eric Alvord having to give way to avoid an actual collision before he recognized at least one of the pair, at sight of whose pale, handsome face he gave a slight exclamation.

It was the face of Nicol Faulkner, and his present companion was none other than Brocky Sam!

The recognition was mutual, and a hot flush chased away the pallor from the face of the rich young broker. His right hand half-raised the cane he carried, but before he could go further Brocky Sam pulled him on, turning his pock-marked face as though whispering a warning, even while his own eyes were staring keenly at the trim, almost foppish figure of the Soft-hand Sport.

Dan Dunn gave no signs of seeing this, or of recognizing the men, but his hand slipped through the arm of the lawyer, checking his impulse to turn after his defeated rival.

"Steady, lad!" he breathed, without moving his lips to betray the fact to other eyes. "Just one word of warning, then I've got to shake you for a while! Keep away from Faulkner. Crowd your game all you can. Strike while the iron is hot, and keep me posted at the hotel!"

Dropping his arm, the Soft-hand Sport cast a keen glance around them. He made a barely perceptible gesture, which was responded to in a like manner by a little wiry man of middle age, who unobtrusively fell in behind the detective as he turned off toward Missouri avenue.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES.

PALE, haggard, looking far from in his usual state of good health, Stuart Meredith sat alone in his library, awaiting the promised visit of Nicol Faulkner.

There were cigars and wine on the table at his elbow, and apparently he had been drinking more freely than usual, possibly in hopes of strengthening his nerves for the coming ordeal. For ordeal it bade fair to be, and now that he was beyond observation, the nabob showed as much in his looks.

He had aged greatly in appearance since the early morning, and the hand with which he poured out another glass of wine trembled so that the neck of the cut-glass decanter clicked audibly against the edge of the smaller vessel.

He was lifting the glass to his lips when his ears caught the faint tinkle of a bell. He gave a start that spilled fully half the rich liquor, and his face turned ashen pale as he replaced the glass on the table, leaning forward, holding his breath, striving to hear every sound that followed.

He drew a long breath of intense relief as he caught a voice in answer to the servant, for it was not that of Nicol Faulkner, as he had feared and expected.

"Not yet!" he muttered, brushing a trembling hand across his high brow. "Will he come at all? Was it only an angry threat, because I refused him the— But no!" with sudden memory. "How could he know of that—that—"

He turned with a forced frown as the library door opened, and it was on his lips to sternly bid his servant refuse him to the strange caller, when Brocky Sam strode into the room, closing the door behind him with a clang!

"Evenin', boss!" he said, bluntly. "Wish you'd discharge that cursed flunkie of yours, for insolence to a gentleman! He wanted to stuff me with some durned nonsense 'bout your not bein' at home, an'—"

"Who the deuce are you, sir? And how dare you force yourself into my presence?" harshly demanded the nabob, rising to his feet with a bony finger pointing to the door. "Begone! or I'll have my servants pitch you out, neck and crop!"

But instead of recoiling as expected, the pock-marked rascal took a step nearer, letting the light fall fairly over his strong features as he insolently returned that fiery gaze.

"Who am I, you ask? Well, s'pose I was to say my name is Lapier Tostivan—how hard would that strike you, boss?"

With the force of a clinched fist, it seemed, for, turning pale and ghastly, the old gentleman shrunk back, sinking into his chair with a low, gasping, choking cry.

The library door reopened, and the pale, startled servant thrust his head into view, his voice stammering:

"Beg pardon, sir, but—the gent—rascal forced his way—"

Brocky Sam strode forward and tapped the magnate sharply on the shoulder, speaking coarsely:

"Tell that cursed fool to take himself off, boss! Tell him that you'll settle with him presently for daring to insult one of your oldest and most respected friends. And add, while you're about it, a warning against his straining his ears at the key-hole!"

Shivering beneath that vicious grip, Stuart Meredith lifted his head and made a gesture which immediately sent the servant away in bewildered confusion and doubt.

Brocky Sam crossed the room and turned the key in the lock, then returned to the table, pouring out a brimming glass of wine, tossing it down his throat as though so much water, suspiciously smacking his lips after the operation, saying in a disgusted tone:

"Is that the best truck you can afford, with all your ducats, old man? Haven't you got a tot or two of genuine grog for your old friend? Time was when you didn't have to wait for a hint and a kick, too!"

Stuart Meredith desperately strove to rally from the shock which the mention of that enigmatical name had given him.

"I don't know you, sir! What can you want with me?" he stammered, his voice sounding just as it did when he tried to face Nicol Faulkner when the broker dealt his first blow, with this same strange weapon.

"I might be Lapier Tostivan, as I hinted a bit ago, but I ain't," coolly replied Brocky Sam, selecting a cigar to his liking, biting off the tip as he settled himself down in a soft-cushioned chair opposite the pale, shaken nabob. "As a matter of fact, I'm representing our mutual friend, Nicol Faulkner, this evening. He promised to call on you. Something turned up to prevent him, and not wanting to wholly disappoint you, he deputized me to do the little job, instead."

"He told you—"

Brocky Sam laughed shortly as the old gentleman forced out these words, though he was unable to complete the question in his mind.

"About that little affair which begun in Orleans, was continued in St. Louis, and is to be finished here in Kansas City? Not a word, my

dear sir, and for a very good reason; he couldn't tell me more than I already knew, ages ago—so to speak!"

Still deeper sunk the heart of the nabob at this confident speech, yet he fought against the terrible conviction with all of his sorely shaken powers.

"I don't understand you, sir!" with a desperate effort bringing his voice tolerably well under command. "I never heard of—or—the name you mentioned!"

Again Brocky Sam laughed in malicious triumph.

"Of course I know a high and mighty gent like you wouldn't tell even the ghost of a lie—not to save your blessed neck from the rope of the hangman, for instance! But, all the same, I'm betting my secret against yours that you can't look me square in the eye and say over the names of Lapier and David Tostivan, without shivering!"

"You are insolent, sir!" hoarsely muttered the hunted nabob.

"And if you didn't know I've got a mighty good right to choose my own words, you'd break your neck hurrying up your flunkies to kick me out doors," laughed Brocky Sam, with a short, vicious nod. "I don't wonder at your wincing, old fellow, but it'll work you no good. I've got you right under my thumb, and you don't dare even squeal above your breath until I give you free leave. You lie when you say that you don't know what I mean by the Tostivan affair. You lie when you hint that you never saw me before; but that don't count so much, for I dare say you've forgotten my figure-head in all these years."

"I don't know you. I never saw you before. I can't imagine what you mean by coming here in such an insolent manner, and only for disliking to alarm my daughter, I would summon the servants and have them lash you off the premises, like any other prowling cur!" hoarsely uttered the magnate, his face flushing, all his former haughty strength of mind seeming to return, as by magic.

Even so cool a hand as Brocky Sam was startled by this wholly unexpected change, and he involuntarily cast his little eyes suspiciously around the room, as though more than half-expecting a dangerous trap to be sprung upon him. But he saw nothing to alarm him farther, and said:

"You will recall my name and face before long, never you fear, old gentleman. Meanwhile, it ought to be sufficient if I say that I come here in the place of Nicol Faulkner. After a fashion, and for the present, I am backing up his little game for ducats and a lovely wife. It was by my advice that he mentioned that Tostivan affair to-day, and—"

"I'll prosecute you both for malicious blackmail!"

"Now you know you're lying, old fellow," sneered the pock-marked rascal, puffing a stream of smoke toward the speaker as a token of his utter contempt, so far as threats went. "You'd pay out half your millions rather than have that old affair raked up for the papers to dwell upon. And you'd almost sooner cut your throat than to have either Faulkner or me go with our little budget to your fine lady daughter!"

With a hollow groan Stuart Meredith sunk back in his chair, covering his face from view with his trembling hands. Only for her! Only for her dear sake, he felt that he could and would boldly defy these human leeches!

"That's right," nodded Brocky Sam, dropping his tone of mockery for one of business. "I came here to do the talking, and for you to play the listener. If you'll hold your hush, and only speak when wanted, we'll get to fair soundings heap sight sooner."

"I told you I set Nicol Faulkner at you to-day. I gave him a bare hint to steer by, but all he knows of that old scrape, he gave you to-day. If he ever knows more about it, that will be your own fault."

"What do you mean?" muttered Meredith, lifting his head with a dull ray of hope struggling in his sunken eyes.

"Just what I say. I'm using the young fellow as a stalking-horse, but I'm ready to turn him out of the pasture the moment you make it worth my while. In still plainer words, I'll throw him over and come back on your side—for an ample consideration, of course."

"Then you are—an infernal blackmailer, after all!"

CHAPTER XXV.

PROBING AN OLD WOUND.

BROCKY SAM laughed, with tigerish playfulness.

"Hard words are something like blank shots, my dear fellow," he said, showing his yellow teeth. "They make a noise and raise a mighty stench, but can't even rub the paint off my hands. Keep them going as long as pleases you, or you think you can afford the cost. You can't have your fun without paying for it, and each crooked word is going to cost you a pretty penny when we come to strike a final balance."

This was plain talking with a vengeance, and

though his proud blood was beginning to run higher as he faced the desperate situation, Stuart Meredith checked the angry words that rose in his throat, saying:

"Once more, I declare that I neither know you nor the business which brings you here, intruding on my presence with a rudeness which only ignorance can justify. Still, since you are here, I will listen to your excuses. Say what you have to say, as briefly as possible."

Brocky Sam listened to these cold, measured sentences, a frown growing deeper on his pock-marked visage. He did not like this unexpected rally on the part of the man whom he had long since marked out as a victim, to be mercilessly plucked. He began dimly to realize that, after all, his little game might prove far more difficult than he had thought.

But he showed nothing of all this in either face or tones. He lay carelessly back in the great easy-chair, smoking as though he enjoyed the fragrant weed, his little eyes keenly watching the effect of each word, though he still affected carelessness to a certain extent.

"Do you know, boss, that it's a mighty mistake your ever growing rich?" he drawled, an insolent admiration in his voice and looks as he added: "Was that adamant check, backed by a tongue that can twist a lie into looking more like truth than truth looks like itself, you'd ought to have been poor; if only to show the world what a thoroughbred confidence man really can be!"

Colder, sterner, harder grew the nabob, in outward seeming, at least.

"Will you please get back to business?" he uttered, sharply. "Time is money, and I have none to waste in listening to the silly maunderings of a wretch who is either drunk or crazy. Say your say, if you would finish it before I call my servants to give you in charge."

"With each fleeting instant this belief is strengthened," laughed Brocky Sam, then undergoing a sudden change, sitting up in his chair, both elbows leaning on the table as his little eyes, filled with reddish glitter, fixed themselves keenly on the pale, thin face of the man opposite, striving to discount the emotions his words awakened. "But, as you so politely insinuate, this is not business. Pardon me, and try to believe that I'll never sin again in that direction."

"You want me to unload, so that you can take stock of my wares, and be making up your mind as to the sum you can afford to offer for the job-lot? Good enough! My cargo is for sale, provided you run a hand deep enough into your pocket, my dear fellow!"

With real or admirably assumed resignation, Stuart Meredith poured out a glass of wine, and lit himself a cigar, settling back in his seat like one preparing for a tedious siege. Brocky Sam smiled grimly, but made no comment. He, too, was preparing for business, after having sated himself with malicious enjoyment.

"It's going a good ways back, boss, but don't take alarm too soon. I'll boil down the matter until you can take in the heft of it at a single breath. So much by way of taking our departure!"

"Before the Civil War, New Orleans couldn't boast of a richer or more highly respected firm than that known on 'Change as Tostivan & Meredith, shippers and owners, with a whole fleet sailing under their flag, so to speak. Maybe you've heard of them, boss?"

Quickly, sharply came the last sentence, and Brocky Sam keenly watched their effect on that cold, stern, hard-set face opposite. But he had given the nabob too much time in which to steel his nerves, and his little trick was an ignominious failure. Not a nerve flinched. It was as though a statue of marble sat across the table from him.

"All right, boss!" with a sulky nod of his shaggy head. "You're not obliged to criminate yourself, and I'll feel so much more at liberty to use plain, unvarnished words for the rest of my little yarn."

"This firm, whose ships sailed in every sea and traded between almost every port of importance on the shipping list, was a good deal older than the two partners with whose doings you and I are interested, for their fathers and grandfathers before them had carried on the same business, at the same stand. And, as a matter of course, seeing that they were cousins by blood, as well as partners in business, Lapier Tostivan and Stuart Meredith were mighty thick together."

"If by that name you allude to me, your pretended history is all a lie on the face of it," coldly interposed the nabob. "I never formed one in any such partnership. I never lived in New Orleans. I never had a partner in business whose name was Lapier Tostivan."

"That covers the whole ground, pretty much, don't it?" grinned the pock-marked schemer, not a bit taken aback, now that he was prepared for a stubborn fight on the part of his intended victim. "Awfully cheeky in me to persist, after such a broadside, but I can't help it; I reckon I was born that way!"

"Please be as brief as possible, then. I can make allowance for a cracked brain, but it is not to be expected that I can stand every-

thing," coldly added the old gentleman, sipping his wine.

"You've got the nerve of—an angel!" bowed Brocky Sam, his little eyes all aglow with ugly malice as he smoothly resumed: "But as I was on the point of stating: the cousins were thick as two thieves, and when trouble came upon Lapier Tostivan, he naturally turned at once to his partner for aid and consolation."

"Meredith at that time was a single man, but Tostivan was married, and had one child—a son. He thought all the world of the kid, and next to him came his young wife. Gay and just a bit wild, unless my information fools my judgment. Fond of society, and somewhat addicted to flirting when a suitable subject offered. But Tostivan suspected something a heap worse than that, and it set his hot blood on fire."

"I don't really believe he had good grounds for going that far, and I took particular pains to post myself on the whole affair, at the time, fancying it might be turned to my own benefit in the time to come. I don't believe the gay young wife was guilty of worse than flirting a bit. She came of good and honorable stock, and that alone should have kept her on the safe side of the line."

"Tostivan thought pretty much this way himself for a long time, and if he hadn't been so infernally proud and stiff-necked, all that afterward transpired might easily have been avoided. You see," with a little laugh, "I am frankly showing my hand. I don't want to make anything more than the simple truth out of the matter."

"You are very considerate!" sneered the nabob, refilling his glass.

"I'm glad you think so. I don't know a man in the town whose good opinion I'd rather have than yours, if I do say as much to your face. But that by the way. Business is business!"

"Instead of frankly talking to his wife about her folly, and what serious pain it was causing him, Tostivan kept still closer under cover and set his spies to work, bidding them report every movement made by the unsuspecting young lady. And they, as a matter of course, wanted to earn their big pay. And so, before another month, Lapier Tostivan became convinced that his wife was false to him and to her wifely vows."

"What has all this got to do with me?" sternly demanded Meredith. "Must I tell you again that the affairs of this Lapier Tostivan have not the slightest interest for me? That I never even heard of the personage until you mentioned his name?"

"Yet you keeled over mighty quick when young Faulkner whispered his name in your ear this morning!" laughed Brocky Sam, catching at the slip, and making the most of it. That looks mighty like a rat, boss!"

"It was not the name. I felt the effects of my accident yesterday," coldly retorted the nabob, but unable to keep the color from deserting his thin cheeks for an instant.

"Bah! do you think to cram that down my throat? If you knew nothing about Lapier Tostivan—if you were not mixed up in the affair, both at Orleans and St. Louis—you'd have me kicked out of this, too, quick! You're called prouder than Lucifer himself. They why meekly bear up under all the insults and taunts with which I have purposely pelted you? Simply, because, knowing your guilt, you fear my making the outside world equally as wise!"

Flushed with a vicious triumph, Brocky Sam watched the effect of his rapid speech. And he laughed again as he saw how plainly the rich man flinched. His hastily donned armor was not perfect. A weak joint was found, and he felt the barb through it!

Meredith attempted a defense, but his voice failed him. He tried to disguise this by a fit of coughing, and then poured himself out another glass of wine to clear his troublesome throat.

"Take your own time, boss," grinned the burly ruffian, with a careless wave of his broad hand. "The night is young, and I'm a bit of an owl in my habits. Besides, I'm not nearly through with my little page of history!"

"As I hinted, Lapier Tostivan was hot-blooded. If he hadn't loved his young wife so dearly, no doubt he would have killed her the same hour that brought him what he felt was conclusive evidence of her guilt. Instead—he sought out his one trusted friend and confidant, after having deliberately pricked out his future course on life's chart."

"That friend, as a matter of course, was his partner, cousin, friendly adviser, all in one, Stuart Meredith. Call him your namesake, if you prefer," with a widening smile as he caught that involuntary shiver.

"Poor Tostivan took it mighty hard. He was considerably older than his young wife, but his love was passionate enough for a score. Pity he was so cold, so self-restrained. Only for that, the trouble would have died a natural death, for I firmly believe that a single kind word would have cleared away all the clouds."

"Unfortunately enough, his partner did not take this view of the matter. Instead of showing Tostivan how foolishly he was acting, he adroitly nursed his suspicions, and even went so

far as to advise him to wipe out all dishonor in his false wife's blood, the—"

"It's false!" hoarsely gasped Meredith, half-starting from his chair, his face turning livid, his sunken eyes all aglow. "It's false! I never—"

He stopped short, sinking back into his seat, covering his face with both hands, groaning faintly as that low, mocking laugh warned him how completely he had exposed himself.

Brocky Sam rubbed his hands together until the horny palms sent out an audible grating. Complete triumph was written on his evil face, and echoed through his every tone as he mockingly uttered:

"And yet you say you never knew Lapier Tostivan! You swear you never lived in Orleans! You never heard that name before it crossed my lips! As though I could make such a clumsy blunder after all these years of waiting and scheming and preparing for the harvest, the seed of which you helped to sow, Stuart Meredith, more than a quarter of a century ago! As though I could be deceived by your tardy masking!"

There was no reply. The wretched man shivered, his face still hidden from view. He knew that further denial would be worse than useless after having so inadly torn the thin mask from his own face.

"You played it better than I expected, old fellow," added Brocky Sam, his voice resuming its former cold mockery, "but you couldn't keep it up long enough. I didn't really care, for I had everything marked out, ship-shape and Bristol fashion, but I never could endure a hypocrite. And so—I set a little trap for you to blunder into."

"And now, while you do your thinking, I'll hark back to my original course, and make port as quickly as possible. Business is business, and I'm its prophet."

"I deny it—I swear you are at fault!" huskily gasped the old man, lifting his head and gazing into that brutal, merciless face.

"For the last time, Stuart Meredith, that won't wash. I know you from truck to kelson, and I'm ready to prove my every word!"

CHAPTER XXVI. TOUCHING THE QUICK.

CASTING aside his cigar, leaning his elbows on the little table between them, Brocky Sam spoke rapidly, coldly, concisely:

"I don't ask you to take my bare word for a cent, boss. All I tell you to-night, I'm ready to back up with solid proofs. If necessary—though I'm betting long odds you'll never have the cheek to force me into that channel!—I could go into court and prove in the eye of the law every assertion I am making!"

"You are the very man to whom Lapier Tostivan went in his great trouble, and you are the man who heartily approved of his worse than crazy project! What was it? Shall I refresh your memory?"

There was no response. Stuart Meredith lay rather than sat in his chair, plainly all unnerved. He did not even try to don his futile mask again. He felt that all was lost—that his great sin had surely found him out, after all these long years—and that knowledge completely unmanned him for the time being.

"Silence gives consent, though none was really needed," laughed the malicious rascal, hugely enjoying his triumph over this proud, cold, haughty magnate of the money world. "I came here to tell you this little story, and nothing you might do or say could change my mind."

"As I said, his trouble came pretty near crazing Lapier Tostivan. In no other manner can his ridiculously wild resolve be satisfactorily explained, for surely no wholly sane man would have followed out his course to the end!"

"He told his cousin that, false though his wife had proven, he loved her too madly to openly expose her to the world's scorn. He would kill her, he said, only that would come to the same thing in the end. And so he was resolved to take his son and vanish from the world!"

"He had it all planned, before he paid that visit to his cousin and partner. He even had a synopsis of their partnership accounts in readiness, plainly showing just what each one was worth should their business affairs be wound up at that hour. He submitted this to his partner, and after carefully examining it, Stuart Meredith—your namesake, you remember!—admitted that it was perfectly correct."

"This settled, Lapier Tostivan divulged his wild scheme."

"He was to take a certain sum in ready cash, for immediate expenses, leaving all the rest of his property in the hands of his partner. A certain amount was to be conveyed to his wife, for, unworthy as he deemed her, he said that he could not bear to think of her suffering for lack of gold to supply her wants, at least until she could provide for herself."

"I reckon that, as he said this, the poor devil was wondering how long it would be after his vanishment before the young wife would console herself with the man who had been at the bottom of the affair!"

"After these deductions were made from the gross amount, Stuart Meredith agreed to execute

a bond—pardon me if I fail to speak with technical accuracy in this respect, as long as I make my meaning perfectly clear, dear sir!—binding him to restore the full amount, with legal interest from date, whenever demanded by either Lapier Tostivan or his son and heir, David Tostivan. In case restitution was demanded by the latter, he was to fully identify himself before having the money paid over to him."

"Such, in brief, was the business part of the affair. If I were less confident, it has not slipped your memory—if I didn't know every detail is standing out in letters of fire on your brain at this very moment—I might try to be more explicit."

"The bond or obligation was duly drawn up, signed and witnessed. Another paper was prepared, showing on the face of it that, for value received, Lapier Tostivan had disposed of his entire interest in the business, ships and cargoes, real estate and other property, to his former partner, Stuart Meredith."

"After all this was accomplished, Lapier Tostivan fully outlined his intentions. He was about to quietly disappear from New Orleans and all places which had known him up to that time. He was to take his son David with him. And not until the curiosity or anxiety of his wife should bring her to Meredith with inquiries after her son and husband, was he to let even a hint drop as to what had transpired."

"When those inquiries were made, Stuart Meredith was to give the deserted wife a sealed envelope, handed him by Lapier Tostivan, without any explanatory remarks, save that the package had just reached him from an unknown source."

"Of course I can't tell you what was inside that envelope, though I might make a pretty close guess at the truth, judging from what followed after it reached the hands of the poor woman."

"She raised an awful racket over it, and for a few days made the life of Stuart Meredith anything but a heaven upon earth. She seemed fairly wild with grief, indignation and womanly fears. She vowed that it was all a frightful mistake, and before many days succeeded in convincing the world that she was right, too!"

Stuart Meredith again hid his face with a faint groan, his thin figure shivering as with an ague-fit. For a brief space Brocky Sam watched him, his thick lips curling back in a malicious grin that revealed his yellow fangs.

"I don't wonder that you groan and sigh over it, boss," he said, in tones of mock sympathy. "It was an awful affair, and there were so many in Orleans that hinted broadly you—I mean the Stuart Meredith of that day—might have prevented it all, even if you didn't have a mighty busy finger in stirring up the trouble!"

"They lied! I never—I did all I could to save her life!"

"That looks better, to be sure," grinned Brocky Sam, at this second admission going to show that he was indeed on the right track. "Not that I took any stock in the ugly stories, mind ye! I knew you better than all that comes to—from hearsay, of course," quickly amending his speech, with a slight frown flashing across his broad face.

He was not quite ready to fully expose his hand, but Stuart Meredith was too sorely shaken to take advantage of the slip, even if he noticed it, which is more than doubtful.

"A bitter black affair, and I don't wonder much at its stirring you up so powerful, even at this late day," the pock-marked scoundrel glibly resumed. "It was bad enough, in all conscience, to charge you with poisoning the mind of her husband against her without even the shadow of truth to back up your foul plottings. But when, after the poor, crazed, deserted girl—for she was little more, in years, at least—died of poison on your office-couch, for the gossips to hint that you knew more than any other how the poor creature swallowed the fatal dose—that was adding foul insult to bitter injury."

Only a heart of stone could have so gloated over the utterly miserable creature cowering deep in his easy-chair. Every sentence seemed to affect him like rubbing salt into a fresh wound. Yet Brocky Sam actually seemed to enjoy the torture he was deliberately prolonging by entering so minutely into the awful tragedy of long ago.

"I never put any faith in that, mind you, for what would be the use? What had you to gain by her death? You had already paid over to her the money left for that purpose by Lapier Tostivan. He was gone, with his son, and might never return to claim his own. Anyway, her death could only benefit you by stilling her fierce, despairing reproaches. And I don't believe you would stain your hands with murder—for nothing of greater importance than that!"

Brocky Sam put a vicious emphasis on his last words, but Stuart Meredith did not appear to suffer more, nor to notice the malicious insinuation. Indeed, he seemed already as wretched as mortal man could be and still continue to draw the breath of life.

"I'm forging a little ahead of my story, but

I thought it best to get the poor woman out of the way as quickly as possible. And now I've buried her, I'll go back to the wild game played by Lapier Tostivan."

"As I said, he provided for his own death, by arranging matters so his son, David Tostivan, could draw the money left in your hands. And that there might not be the slightest possibility of a mistake made in this, he proposed to mark his little kid so that no impostor could be wrung in on his innocent, unsuspecting cousin and late partner."

"That was no difficult matter, in a city where sailors flock like crows to a roost, and Lapier Tostivan had already provided for that. He brought in a man who tattooed a mark on the kid's left shoulder, behind; these marks: A circle, inside of which was written the date of dissolving partnership and the signing of those papers: 'March 4, 1859.' Under this date were the initials of the kid's name: 'D. T.'"

While Brocky Sam was deliberately describing these marks for future identification, Stuart Meredith fought back his agitation, lifting his head and staring with bloodshot eyes into that hard, lined face. And as the pock-marked ruffian ceased speaking, he hoarsely panted:

"Man or devil—who are you that knows so much of—"

Brocky Sam laughed softly as he slowly drawled:

"I'm not Lapier Tostivan's son David, for I'm too old. I'm not Lapier himself, because—I never was murdered!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

IMMUNITY FOR INFORMATION.

AS he reached the corner of Missouri and Grand avenues, Dan Dunn cast a quick, keen glance over his shoulder. He could see nothing of Eric Alvord, but the little, wiry-built man of middle age who had answered his covert signal while on Main street was now close behind him. Another sign brought the spy close alongside.

"Well, Turnbull, what's the word?" asked the Soft-Hand Sport, as he kept on up Missouri avenue.

"Fair to good, if I may judge, sir," was the prompt reply, in the same careless yet guarded tones used by the detective.

"You were after those two—no need to mention names. Then, of course, they've crossed the other trail?"

"Or I would not be here, sir."

"As I said, of course. I knew Brocky Sam used to run the gang the woman belonged to, in St. Louis, and I had an idea you'd stumble over his tracks in that quarter."

"He just came from there, sir."

"And our gay young broker with him, eh? Well, what did you manage to pick up?"

"Very little, at or near the house, beyond what was reported early this morning. The man must be in a pretty bad way, for the woman looks like a walking ghost, and there has been no sign of decamping."

Dan Dunn laughed softly to himself. He remembered that he had not stopped to measure the force of his blow when he made use of Kit Melady's own sand-bag on the head of that unworthy.

"As ordered, I left the boys on guard, and followed her callers. I picked up a word or two which may or may not be of use. For one thing, there is to be a change of programme; the heavy fellow said he was going to call on the nabob in place of the tall one."

A quick glow shot into the eyes of the Soft-Hand Sport, but he made no comment. And as Robert Turnbull apparently had emptied his budget for the nonce, he made a gesture which the wiry ferret interpreted by striking ahead at a rapid pace, followed at some short distance by the tall detective.

From what the spy said, it will be seen that Dan Dunn was not depending entirely upon his own skill and energies in the game he was playing. In fact, in five minutes after reaching his hotel the night before, after his narrow escape from death at the hands of the sand-baggers, keen eyes were on the lookout for Don Fisher as hackman. And before Dan Dunn breakfasted that morning, he knew his game was safely holed.

Ten minutes' brisk walking carried the two men out past the thick of the East Side, and with a signal which was readily interpreted, Turnbull indicated the dingy-looking building in which Brocky Sam found Belle Shado grieving over her injured husband.

Dan Dunn briskly strode up to the front, ringing the bell sharply. Almost immediately there was a sound at one of the windows, and he caught a fleeting glimpse of a woman's face through the turning blind.

Instantly his face was averted and his whole figure seemed to shrink in its dimensions, until one would hardly have recognized him as the athletic sport of a moment before. And the little ruse worked to his perfect satisfaction, for the door was partly opened a moment after, Belle Shado clearly failing to recognize his altered face, thanks to the art of the barber, at first glance.

"You cannot enter, sir," she hurriedly utter-

ed, her tones harsh and strained. "The master is very ill, and— You, Dan Dunn!"

Almost in a shriek came the name, and starting back she would have closed the barrier, but for the prompt action of the detective whom she so greatly dreaded. With foot and hand he foiled her efforts, pushing his way inside, only to stand menaced by a revolver!

"Shoot, and salt won't save Kitsy, my good woman," coolly, evenly warned the Soft-hand Sport, making no attempt to disarm her by other than words. "Simmer down, and not a hair of his sweet head shall be injured by me or mine. Boil over, and up you go, both of you!"

As he uttered the last words, Dan Dunn opened his vest to afford a glimpse of a golden badge, at sight of which the poor, half-distracted woman staggered back, the armed hand dropping nerveless to her side.

With deft skill Dan Dunn caught the weapon before it touched the floor, thus averting a possible accident. With a dexterous motion he broke down the barrel, ejecting the cartridges, reclosed the weapon and placed it on the hat-stand. All this in a single breath, as it were, and before Shady Belle could fairly realize what was coming he had supported her into the parlor, gently placing her in an easy-chair.

"You're losing your old nerve, Belle," he said, with a low, mellow laugh, at the sound of which the wretched woman shrunk and shivered as though in speechless terror. "Time was when you'd have pulled trigger while drawing, and I rather half-expected something of the kind this bout. What's the matter with you, anyway, girl?"

The last words came with a trace of sharp impatience, and Belle Shado desperately rallied, hoarsely muttering:

"I'll kill you if you dare touch him! Haven't you done enough?"

"Only what Kitsy compelled me to do, my girl. Even you could hardly expect me to fold my little hands and take a bath in the Kaw, simply because he fancied I was in his and your path. But is he so far gone as all that comes to? My men said that he was in no particular danger. If they have reported on a mere surmise, don't be backward about telling me, Belle, and I'll look for more reliable servants."

Dan Dunn was not talking altogether for the pleasure of hearing his own voice. He saw that the woman was slowly but surely regaining her scattered nerves, and this was just what he wanted. If harder to deal with, more reliance could be placed on her promises, when won.

"What do you want?" she at length asked, sullenly, for the first time fairly meeting his keen gaze.

"To make a bargain with you, Belle," was the prompt response. "To promise you full immunity for past offenses, so far as they concern myself, in return for what information you may be able to give me on a certain point of interest. Will you agree to this?"

"Put it still plainer," the woman said, slowly, having trouble in keeping her voice under control, and unable to entirely mask the glad light that leaped into her swollen eyes at his speech, so different from what she naturally expected.

"All right, Belle, I'll do it. You don't need to be reminded of all that happened yesterday and last night. I don't need to tell you that, if I like, I can send your beloved Kitsy over the road for half the rest of his life-lease; for you've had experience enough to realize as much, without further explanation."

"I'll kill you first!" panted the woman, with a flash of her recent desperation during which she had made an effort to end all with his life.

"I don't doubt you'd try it on, Belle," with a mild laugh, as he watched her closely, though with half-closed eyes. "I know you're true as steel to your man—pity he don't deserve it better, but that's beside the question."

"Let him and his failings alone, will you?" fiercely.

"With the greatest of pleasure, my dear," bowing easily. "I was simply trying to compliment your fidelity, and at the same time show why I am ready and even anxious to compromise. Not that I love Kitsy less, but I respect you heap more!"

"You mocking demon!" panted the woman, now thoroughly aroused.

Dan Dunn laughed briskly, rubbing his hands together as he straightened up, taking on a more business-like air as he added:

"That's hearty, and now I see you're wide awake once more. If I had to rub it in a little tough, remember that one clear head is worth a score muddle-pates in a treaty like the one I have in my mind's eye. You're fit to take in all the fine points, and I'm quite ready to make them."

"In the first place—what brought Brocky Sam here to-day?"

Shady Belle gave a start, the momentary flush of anger fading out of her face, the hunted look returning to her reddened eyes.

"Don't speak in too big a hurry, Belle," warned Dan Dunn, his tone cold and stern. "It's heap easier to set a lie afoot than to smother it afterward. I'm bargaining for the

straight truth, and nothing less than that will let Kitsy sleep under his own roof this blessed night!"

"How am I to know that you'll keep your promise?" slowly, suspiciously muttered the woman, pressing one hand to her painfully throbbing temples.

"Did you ever know of my breaking word with either friend or foe, Belle? Not to my knowledge. But even if you do, what else can you do? All I need to do is to sound a single whistle, and every soul in this ranch will be pulled, for keeps!"

"Not alive, though!"

"But if you are sensible, and give me the information I ask, I'll pledge my sacred word of honor not only to let you and Kit Melady go scot-free, but I'll pay you any reasonable sum besides."

"I don't want your money. All I ask is time enough for Kit to recover from the foul blow you dealt him, so I can take him out of town, to begin another and better life. I'm done with crookedness from this time forward!" impetuously cried the woman, evidently deeply in earnest.

"Begin your better life by exposing the wicked schemes of Brocky Sam and his new partner, then," quickly retorted the Soft-hand Sport. "I know a good deal, but I want to know more. I know that he paid you a visit this morning, but I want to know just what brought Nicol Faulkner here with him. You can tell me: will you do it?"

"To save my husband—yes!"

A glow of stern joy leaped into the gray eyes of the detective at this complete victory, but as by a series of deftly-chosen questions he learned all that Belle Shado could tell him concerning that visit, his exultation dropped several degrees.

She told him frankly all that had passed between Brocky Sam and herself, concealing nothing whatever, but it was far from as much as Dan Dunn expected. True, he fancied he now knew the cause of Stuart Meredith's sudden illness, but there was still something lacking.

"You are positive as to the name of the man whom he wanted you to claim as your husband?"

"Eric Alvord. How could I mistake that, after—after the part he played yesterday?" with a swift catching of her breath in the middle of the sentence. "He spoke the name more than once. But I refused to have anything to do with it. I knew he was your friend, or connected with you in some way, and while poor Kit was lying so helpless, I didn't dare make a move against you—don't you see?"

"I believe you, Belle," keeping his secret annoyance admirably hidden from view. "I'll pay you back in the same coin. I'll even protect Kit and you from all others, as long as you play me white, but you want to keep one point distinctly in view: Don't try to make a moonlight flitting of it, or you'll surely come to grief!"

"How can I—and poor Kit unable to lift a finger or even open his dear eyes?" faintly murmured the woman, her own eyes growing dim with tears which she tried hard to fight back.

"Is he so bad as all that?"

"I don't see how it could be worse. He hasn't moved of his own accord since Don Fisher brought him home. He lies there like a corpse, only for his faint, almost imperceptible breathing. If—Sam promised to send a doctor to look after him, and I thought at first you were the one, but—"

"I'll send up one, if you would like," said Dan Dunn, rising to his feet, his mission over.

Shady Belle shook her head silently. She would wait for the man spoken of by Brocky Sam, or else send for medical aid herself.

"All right. Now remember, Belle, my girl; keep my call secret, above all from Brocky Sam. I pledge my word not to let harm come to you or Kit, if you trust wholly in me. But if you try to run away, my men have strict orders to run you all in, too quick!"

"They are keeping mighty keen watch over the place, and a rat couldn't slip away unperceived," said the Soft-hand Sport, as he left the room, to pass out at the front door and stride swiftly away.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DIGGING A COUNTERMINE.

NEAR the middle of that same afternoon, Robert Turnbull carried a sealed message to the office where Eric Alvord was busily engaged, and placed it in the young lawyer's hands with a brief word of explanation.

"The gent is waiting for an answer, but he said I needn't take the trouble to fetch it, sir!"

With a short nod he backed out of the office, leaving Alvord to tear open the envelope and glance quickly over the single line it contained:

"Come to Hotel Brunswick at once. Room 27."

There was no signature, but Alvord had no difficulty in divining the writer, for that number had caught his eye just before he entered Dan Dunn's chamber, that same morning.

As quick as a cat could take him, Alvord obeyed this summons, and at his hasty tread

along the corridor, Dan Dunn opened the door of his room, greeting him with a smile:

"Good enough, pardner! I like a man who can make quick time. Come in and make yourself as miserable as possible, won't you?"

"What is the matter? Anything new?" hastily demanded the young lawyer, his anxiety showing in face and tones.

Not until he had entered, and the door was closed and locked behind them, did Dan Dunn answer:

"Nothing new—to me. It may be news in your eyes, though!"

Something in his tones caused the young lawyer to turn a little pale, with a sudden fluttering at his heart that checked his breath for a brief space. He sunk into a chair, gazing anxiously into the smiling countenance of this comparative stranger, yet in whom he began to place such perfect confidence, on whose strength he was fast learning to rely as a tower of safety.

"Don't get in a flutter, pard," laughed the Soft-hand Sport, his keen eyes seeming to take in everything at a glance. "There's nothing to get frightened at. Instead, unless we make a mighty bad break, we'll come out top of the heap in shorter meter than I dared hope for."

"If it's good news, I can wait," with a long breath of relief.

He was obliged to test his patience, too, for Dan Dunn seemed in no particular haste to explain himself. He poured out some wine, silently inviting his visitor to drink by pushing the glass toward him. He was a long while selecting and lighting a cigar; but when he did break the silence, his tongue ran on glibly enough.

"It's been one of the busiest days I've known for an age!" he began, then went on to explain why he had left the young lawyer so abruptly after their call at Stuart Meredith's office.

He told of his visit to Belle Shado's house, and concealed nothing of what transpired while there. He listened in silence to the indignant ejaculations with which Alvord received, at second-hand, the foul scheme which Brocky Sam tried to set in motion against him, making no remark until Eric calmed down after the explosion.

"I wouldn't have told you this, since the trick exploded before it was fairly tried on," he said, gravely, "but I had a purpose in so doing. In no other way could I hope to so readily gain your consent to a sort of counter-mine I've pretty well outlined in my mind."

"I'll stop at nothing short of a crime to get even with the dirty scoundrels!" passionately cried the angry lawyer.

"Even to aiding a man to play eavesdropper?"

"Even to taking the part my own self! Why, just think of it, man!" with a fresh burst of honest indignation. "Think what it would have been to—to us all, if she had consented to help them out with their infamous trick! Think of it—I'll thrash the whelp within an inch of his life!"

"After I'm through with him, please," laughed Dan Dunn, his gray eyes fairly lit up with grim delight.

This was so much better than he had dared hope, at the outset. He still had doubts, but they were not nearly so strong as when he first planned his counter-mine, as he called the move he had in view.

"I think I've got a rod in pickle that will cut deeper and sting sharper than even your horse-whip, pard," he added, briskly. "All I ask is for you to give me a fair chance of making my words good, and then, if your vengeance is not wholly satisfied, I'll agree to stand by and hold your hat while you play ring-master to his clown! What say: is it a bargain?"

The angry lawyer hesitated, but only for a single breath. Then he grasped the proffered hand, pressing it warmly as he said:

"Have it your way, Dunn. Only point out what I'm to do, and I'll back your game to the end, if it costs me my life!"

"No danger of that," laughed the Soft-hand Sport, lightly. "Unless I'm terribly out in my calculations, the whole game will be won without a shot being fired or a blow struck on either side. Now listen:

"Of course you must have suspected the existence of a black secret in the past life of Stuart Meredith. I admit as much. He has sinned bitterly, and richly deserves all and more than the punishment he is just beginning to feel. But Faulkner and Brocky Sam are not the right ones to punish him."

"While you think you are?" hesitated Alvord.

"In a certain degree—yes," after a barely perceptible pause. "But I think he will suffer less at my hands than at theirs. If only for your sake, pard!"

"He's an old man, Dunn. It seems hard to hound him down!"

"It would be harder yet to stop the wheels of justice, now they have fairly set in motion. Don't worry your brain over that part of the affair, but tell me this much: Can you, think, through Miss Meredith, win me a chance of

overhearing what this precious Brocky Sam has to say for himself to-night in his threatened visit to Stuart Meredith?"

It was a hard question to answer; nearly as hard to ask of one bearing so near and dear a relation to the child of the man whose past sins were almost surely to be freely ventilated; and Dan Dunn waited his answer with thinly-veiled anxiety.

"Must this be done?" slowly asked the young lawyer.

"It is the shortest, surest method of getting the better of these rascals," was the prompt response. "I might manage without this advantage, but you can easily see what a bulge it would give me over them."

Eric Alvord bowed his head in his hands, sinking into deep and troubled thought. And Dan Dunn softly muttered:

"Remember that I already know everything that can be brought up against Stuart Meredith. If I wished, I could put him in irons at any hour, without taking further trouble. But I want to spare him as much as possible, for your sake, and for the sake of the innocent girl whom you love so dearly. Count all this in, pard, before deciding."

Eric Alvord lifted his head and looked keenly, searchingly into the eyes of the detective. They never flinched. There was no deceit to be read in them. And his decision was made then and there:

"I'll do my best for you, Dunn. I'll go and see Linnet, and try to win her over, without too plainly betraying the truth. But, mind you, man!" with his first and last flash of stern suspicion: "If I learn afterward that you have been playing me dirt, I'll have your life-blood if it brings me to the gallows the next hour!"

"And I'll not lift a single finger to hinder you from carrying out your vow, pardner!" promptly replied the detective.

"Then— I'm off!" added Alvord, rising to his feet. "Shall I come back here to report success?"

"If you please. I'll be here any time after five o'clock. Until then, I'll be busy outside, polishing up my little scheme for turning the tables on the rascals."

Their hands met once more in a firm grip. There was a wistful, almost imploring light in the young lawyer's eyes as he muttered:

"If I thought I could argue you out of this business, Dunn, I believe I'd be the happiest man on God's footstool this blessed day."

"If any living mortal could change my course, you're the one, Eric Alvord," said the Soft-hand Sport, tightening his grip until their fingers seemed fairly welded together. "I owe you my life. I love you as I might have loved a brother, had one been given me. I'll do more for you, this day, than for any other living man, with a single exception. But not even you can stop me now! Not even you can check me before I reach the end I marked out, years ago!"

"Then—be as merciful with him as you can, I beg of you."

"For your sake I will. Only for you, Eric, I would not have taken all this trouble. I had everything in readiness to spring the trap, and the job would have been finished last night, had I not discovered your deep interest in the family. Isn't that sufficient guarantee?"

"It is more than I had a right to expect, and I thank you for it from the very bottom of my heart, Dan Dunn!"

Nothing further was said. The Soft-hand Sport unlocked his door and bore the young lawyer company to the street. There they parted, Alvord hastening away on the most delicate mission of his life, the detective to finish his careful preparations for springing his man-trap.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BROCKY SAM INTRODUCES HIMSELF.

THERE is such a thing as driving a desperate man too far, and the pock-marked rascal began to realize that fact, just as his tortured victim turned to bay.

A hoarse, choking cry escaped the livid lips of the hunted nabob, and an instant later a revolver glittered in his grasp, its muzzle shooting forward until it almost touched the broad bosom of the mocking schemer, in whose startled ears grated the fierce threat:

"I'll bear no more, you devil! I'll kill you, if I hang—"

If he had not been so desirous of making a sure thing of it, no doubt Stuart Meredith would have been as good as his threat, but Brocky Sam was quick to recover and prompt to act. With a snake-like swaying of his body to one side, and a rapid stroke with his strong arm in the opposite direction, he not only escaped the bullet, but disarmed his half-crazed adversary.

The smoking weapon fell upon the heavily-carpeted floor with a barely perceptible sound. His right hand and arm nearly benumbed by that fierce stroke, Stuart Meredith sunk back into his seat, pale and gasping, scarcely realizing what he himself was doing.

"You hangdog cur!" panted Brocky Sam, ghastly pale from his narrow escape from death

just while at the height of his triumph, as he shot out his powerful arms to fasten upon the shivering, unmanned nabob. "Add another murder to your list, would ye?"

"Help—aid me!" gasped the wretched old man, no more than a puling infant in that angry grasp; but he could not have chosen a better defense than was contained in those faint, husky words.

Though the cry itself could hardly have gone the length of the library, it recalled to Brocky Sam the shot which had been fired, and which would almost certainly spread alarm throughout the building, and slackening his fierce grip on his victim, he hurriedly hissed:

"Leave explanation to me—say a word or make a motion to betray who and what I am, and I'll tell them all of your murdering Lapier Tostivan!"

There was no time to say more. Already he could hear hasty steps in the wide hall, and before he could pick up the revolver and resume his seat, the door was hurled open and Eric Alvord, closely followed by Linnet Meredith, with sundry startled servants to be seen in the rear, entered the room, pale and startled, but the young lawyer, at least, ready for prompt and decided action.

"There isn't anything wrong, sir—and you, ma'am," with a low bow as he caught sight of Linnet. "Simply an accident, which could neither be foreseen nor avoided. Mr. Meredith happened to knock his pistol from the table with his elbow, and, somehow or other, it exploded."

"Father!" cried Linnet, springing to his side, sinking on her knees as she gazed affrighted into his pale, haggard features. "You are in pain? You are suffering? The bullet struck you?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear lady," hastily interposed Brocky Sam, his empty left hand closing with a vicious grip on the shoulder of the nabob as he hurriedly added: "Tell her that I'm right, Mr. Meredith! Say that you are safe and sound. That you are only shaken a bit by your narrow escape!"

That touch was enough, without the words, underneath which lay a thinly-veiled threat only too readily recognized by the hunted nabob.

With a strong effort he rallied, touching his cold, trembling lips to the fair brow of his fairer daughter, murmuring:

"You hear—it is so, my darling! The shot did not touch me."

"And he'll be himself again in a few moments, ma'am," said Brocky Sam, stooping as though to place the pistol on the table, but breathing in the ear of the nabob as his face came closest: "Send 'em off, or—"

He left the sentence incomplete in words, but Stuart Meredith knew what they would have been, only too well. For a single breath he hesitated, casting a glance from Linnet to that harsh, pock-marked face, the thinly-veiled threat upon which decided him. He could not fight. Anything would be preferable to having that coarse, brutal rascal pouring the story of a sinful past into her ears!

"I am already myself, little woman," he uttered, with a laugh that sounded perfectly natural, as he once more touched his lips to her brow, then gently pushed her from him. "I promise not to be so careless again. Now—go with Eric, and keep him from growing weary with waiting. I wish to see him before he leaves."

During all this time, Eric Alvord had stood irresolute, yet ready to hurl himself at the throat of Brocky Sam in case his strong suspicions of evil were confirmed. But now, as Linnet reluctantly obeyed the gentle impulse lent by her parent's hand, the young lawyer slipped her hand through his arm, turning and leaving the library without a word of reluctance, or even another glance toward the pock-marked rascal!

"What sort of trick-door have you got there, anyway, curse you!" grated Brocky Sam, his little eyes flashing with an ugly light as he silently crossed the room to see for himself.

The bolt was shot, and as he keenly though quickly examined the lock, he decided that he must have turned the key without having the door perfectly closed. With a grim nod he now made sure the fastening was complete, then returned to his former position, lifting the decanter to his lips and half draining it before pausing to catch breath.

"Better than nothing, but it don't satisfy like vitriol," he muttered as he replaced the vessel on the table. "I want something that rips up the lining and fills it full of prickles, like swallowing a dried prickly pear! And after I'm through with you, my handy assassin, I reckon I'll have ducats enough to gratify my slightest and vastest desires!"

"I'm only sorry I didn't kill you," slowly, coldly muttered the hunted nabob. "Don't crowd me too hard. The next attempt may be more of a success!"

Brocky Sam scowled blackly at this, and for a brief space he gazed in silence into the white, haggard face of the capitalist. Had he played too long on one string? Had he driven his vic-

tim to bay in deadly earnest? Or was this no more than that other—a flickering flash of despair, which would end of itself in another moment?

Even were this not the case, and should the nabob continue desperately defiant, he felt that he held the game in his own hands, though he might have to change his plan as already outlined. And to determine this doubt, the burly rascal spoke up sharply:

"I don't mean to give you another chance, Stuart Meredith. Either cool down and acknowledge that I've got you under my thumb, or I'll summon all your household to come and listen to the tragic tale of how ruin, death and desolation came upon the Tostivan family!"

Coldly, sternly he uttered these words, keenly watching their effect on the hunted nabob. And a low, mocking laugh of insolent triumph parted his thick lips as he saw Meredith shrink and shiver, cowering down in the depths of his easy-chair, once more wholly unmanned.

But Brocky Sam was merciless. If he ever knew the meaning of the words pity and compassion, he certainly did not recognize either in this connection. His main object was to complete his victory, once for all, and he added, sharply, clearly:

"Shall I call your dainty daughter back, to whisper in her little ear the tale of how you poisoned the mind of Lapier Tostivan, before you poisoned the body of his deserted wife?"

"I never—before high Heaven I never injured her!" gasped the wretched man, his tones barely audible to even those keen ears.

"Of course you can prove that?" sneered the merciless ruffian, rubbing his horny palms until they grated like the rustling scales of a coiling serpent. "Such a dainty, loving judge would not ask for overwhelming proofs, remember! And I can't summon the murdered woman to give in her own evidence—worse luck!"

"You merciless demon! Are you trying to drive me mad?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear fellow," airily replied Brocky Sam, his tones, manner and looks changing with startling suddenness. "You're the best friend I've got in the world, because I expect to fill my pockets through your agency. If I spoke harshly, blame your own stiff neck, not me! It cut me to the very quick, but what could I do less? Meekly bow my head? Slink away like a beaten cur, tail betwixt legs, to starve in a kennel instead of living in a palace?"

"Right there you made your big mistake, Meredith, for I never was built that way!"

This change of tone and manner seemed to lend the old man a little of the strength of body and brain which he so sorely needed, and once more he partially straightened up in his chair, staring at the burly rascal with a dull, vague curiosity in his bloodshot eyes.

"Who are you, demon? I have seen you before, though—"

"You have seen me more times than your head has hairs, Meredith," laughed Brocky Sam, hitching his chair yet a little closer before adding: "Who am I? Look again, and more closely. What! have you clean forgotten Captain Sam Crossley, the man who marked that infant?"

CHAPTER XXX.

DRIVING A HARD BARGAIN.

A LOW cry of tardy recognition escaped the pale lips of the rich man whose long-ago sins were at last finding him out.

"You—Captain Crossley!" he muttered, huskily.

"At your service, boss, provided you consent to meet me on my own footing," was the prompt response.

"Impossible! You—he was drowned, years ago!"

"Not if I know my own mother's son, he wasn't," laughed the burly rascal, seemingly in high good humor once more. "Shall I convince you of your mistake? Shall I go over all that happened the day Lapier Tostivan brought me into your presence to tattoo little David Tostivan for future recognition in case fate willed that he, instead of his father, should come to claim the wealth your once partner left in your care as a sacred trust? Shall I tell you how—don't you remember that Lapier Tostivan turned ill when the kid began to yell as he felt my needles? Don't you remember how you volunteered to hold him instead?"

Slowly the light faded out of the rich man's eyes as the pock-marked ruffian rapidly recalled the past after this fashion. He did remember, and he knew only too well that this must be the ship captain whom he had long since believed dead and buried fathoms deep in the ocean. And knowing this, he felt the worse than folly of fighting further against fate!

"What do you want of me, Sam Crossley? Why do you come like an ugly ghost of the past, to torture my dying days?"

Brocky Sam laughed harshly, scornfully.

"Don't be a hypocrite, and don't try to come the sniffler over an old stager like me, Meredith, for it won't work. If anything, it'll make me bear down still harder on you than I otherwise

would. I'm no angel myself, but I do eternally despise a whining, canting hypocrite!"

Sniveling with all his old fears, Stuart Meredith sunk back in his chair, fearfully awaiting the full weight of the blow which no effort of his could longer avert.

"Mind, my covey," viciously added Brocky Sam, his evil eyes glowing redly as he grated forth the words: "I owe you one on my own account. You turned me adrift just when I most needed employment. You excused yourself on the plea that, as I had taken to drink, I was not fit to longer command a vessel, where human lives might be sacrificed through my drunkenness!"

"What else could I do?" faintly muttered Meredith, with a flicker of his old sternness. "You lost one ship, through your weakness, and a score of precious lives with her! What else could I do?"

"What else did you do? Set a black mark against my name, and took precious good care that no other firm would give me a ship, or even a berth as mate! You black-listed me, curse you! You spread my description all over the world, and made it impossible for me to live by my profession! Why, you merciless hound! I was twice refused a place as ordinary seaman, through your malignancy!"

There was no reply to this fierce charge, and Brocky Sam speedily cooled down. After all, was he not more than even with this man?

"But let that go, for now," he said, smoothing his flushed face by passing one huge hand over it. "I swore then that I'd have a precious revenge, and though years upon years rolled by without bringing me any nearer its fulfillment, I kept faith that my turn would yet come. It has come, at last, and the little job I did for you two, long ago, is on the point of being paid for, mighty richly, too!"

"It would take too long to tell you all the crooks and turns, but maybe it'll be sufficient for you to know that I never entirely lost sight of the little kid on whose left shoulder I put my brand! Not that it was at all certain that it would ever bring money to my purse, but somehow I couldn't help feeling that you would try to play double if a fair chance offered. I was sure of it after—but let that point rest, for the present!"

"I say that I kept track of the kid. Not that I held him under my eyes all of the time. There were months and even years during which he was out of my sight, but I always stumbled up against him in the end. And then—after a certain event transpired, down in St. Louis—"

A low, malicious laugh parted his lips as Stuart Meredith gave a short, husky gasp, sinking further back in his chair, hiding his face in his trembling hands.

"Did anything bite you, dear fellow?" purred the merciless villain, in a tone of mock solicitude. "Did anything I said hurt your feelings?"

There was no reply, in words. But that pitiful, moaning sound was enough to tell him how thoroughly he was torturing his enemy, and Sam Crossley was content for the time, without further pressing that point.

"My hardest job was to keep track of you, high and mighty, proud and eminent though you had become, fattening on the store of gold left as a trust in your hands by Lapier Tostivan. Time and again I lost sight of you, and for several years I thought you had cheated both me and justice by leaving this sinful world! But then, just as I was beginning to despair, I tracked you to this place, and having found you permanently settled here, I took the back track to hunt up David Tostivan. And—I—found—him!"

Again that pitiful, moaning sound. By no other sign did Stuart Meredith betray the fact that he was still capable of hearing and understanding what was said to him by this merciless enemy.

"I found David Tostivan, but found him in perfect ignorance of his real name, of his past history, of his rights out of which you had so long kept him, Stuart Meredith! And finding him, I brought him here, to hold him over your head as a fatal weapon, should you be so foolish as to defy me and refuse to share your ill-gotten wealth at my demand!"

"It is a lie! He is dead—dead and—"

"You'll think him a mighty lively corpse, if I have to bring him forward as David Tostivan," laughed Brocky Sam, then abruptly growing cold and business-like as he added: "You know him as Nicol Faulkner. I can prove his identity beyond a doubt, even in a court of law, if you crowd me that far. And knowing this: knowing the nature of the man, and how hot he already is against you for throwing him over in favor of young Alvord, you can guess how little mercy he would show to the man who killed—who holds the fortune rightfully belonging to him, as the sole living heir to Lapier Tostivan!"

"But I'll never bring him forward, or give him a hint as to who he really is, if you open your hands to me, freely. Faulkner would pay me thousands for my secret, but you can pay me still more, because you have so much more at stake. Think of it for a moment. Think what I can do. Think what would be the con-

sequence of my publishing broadcast the hidden page from your early life. Think of your dainty daughter."

That was the worst. Stuart Meredith was thinking of her. And, bitterly black though his sins might have been, he was now being terribly punished for them.

"Business is business, old fellow," more lightly added Brocky Sam. "Meet me half-way, and your secret dies with me. I ask a big price, as a matter of course, but you can stand it. Better a loss of part, than a loss of all, besides the shameful exposure which will crush the heart of your child."

"I know that you are rich, and I know that, only for the fortune left in trust by Lapier Tostivan, you would never have made such a fortune. I know that it would hardly break you up even were you to have to restore that fortune, with compound interest, on the bond signed by you in favor of Lapier Tostivan and his son, David. And so, simply the loss of the principal need not give you a second thought, great as that sounds in the ears of a poor devil like me."

"What do you demand? I can't stand much more—I feel as though death was claiming me, even now!" gasped the hunted nabob, huskily.

"Tell that to the marines!" sneered Brocky Sam, his eyes flashing. "You were ever given to whining, even in your strongest days, you cur!"

The wretched man sunk back into his chair, again hiding his face.

"Now I'll tell you my terms: I like young David, and he must be provided for. Swear that you will throw Alvord over, and marry your daughter to Faulkner, paying him—as her dowry, if you prefer—one-half his rightful fortune on the wedding day, the remainder to be his at your death. Give me a snug little penny for my trouble, and I'll swear to forever keep your secret safe. This, if you are wise enough to accept my offer. If you refuse—then I'll tell the lad everything, and help him to run you down—to the gallows!"

Stuart Meredith suddenly lifted his head, desperation in every line, his eyes glowing redly, his tones hoarse and strained as he said:

"I deny all! You can bring no proofs sufficient to outweigh my sworn statement! You have gone too far, you merciless demon!"

He stopped short, for Brocky Sam was laughing coldly, sneeringly in his very face, like one who holds his deadliest weapon in reserve.

"Try to face us down, and I'll bring proof positive that you murdered Lapier Tostivan, down in St. Louis!" the ex-ship-captain cried, in clear, vicious tones.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ON THE BRINK OF DESPAIR.

AGAIN that shivering fit seized upon the hunted man, though he strove desperately to withstand these repeated blows, and even met that wicked stare without drooping his own eyes.

"I never harmed him—I never lifted hand against him!" he muttered, his tones hoarse and strained. It is all a lie, base as—

"Dare you swear no hired tool of yours lifted hand against Lapier Tostivan, as well?" sharply interposed Brocky Sam, leaning forward until his wine-tainted breath fairly swept across the pale, haggard face of the rich man.

"I swear—I never harmed him! I know not what you mean!"

There was a brief silence, during which the battle of eyes continued, but the courser nature won. Reluctantly, fighting to the last, Stuart Meredith yielded, his eyes drooping, his figure once more seeming to lose all nerve, all strength to maintain its uprightness.

Brocky Sam laughed, not loud but with almost satanic malice in its every note. He filled a glass of wine and sat sipping it daintily as he gazed complacently at his victim.

"You've made your last effort, old man, and failed!" he said, as he replaced the empty glass and resumed his business-like tone. "I knew it must come, first or last, and I really expected a tougher bout than this proved itself. Yet—why should I? The truth is mighty and must prevail!"

"Every word I have uttered this night: every hint I have dropped before you—I can prove before the stiffest-backed court of law in all the land! You ought to remember that I was counted no fool in those days before the war, when I honored you by running your ships. Be sure I've not lost my grip on good solid horse sense since then."

"I've showed you the sort of wares I have to offer. I've showed you just what they will cost you, in a lump. If you don't want them, I'll hunt another purchaser. But if I have to do this, I'll never rest easy until there's a rope collar about your neck and the hand of the hangman gripping your shoulder."

"Spare me—have mercy!" gasped Stuart Meredith, shivering in an agony of woe. "Devil! would you drive me mad?"

"Not a bit of it, my hearty," laughed Brocky Sam, changing his tones and manner quickly. "I want to leave you, as I found you, honored and respected by your neighbors, loved and obeyed by your daughter. I swear to keep your

black secret as sacredly as though my own head must pay the forfeit, provided you meet me half-way. Can you ask more?"

There was no answer, though he paused for one. His face grew a little harder at this, and after awhile he added, coldly:

"It is barely possible that I haven't made everything perfectly clear to your comprehension, Meredith. Your tumble from the carriage seems to have strangely muddled your wits, which used to be keen enough for a dozen."

"There's no need to run over what happened in Orleans, nor how you barely escaped financial wreck after the war broke out."

"All was lost—his money with the rest!" moaned Meredith.

"Not all, else you couldn't have picked up so quickly, after getting North. No, nearly all, as I could prove if necessary. But never mind that part, since we've now got to your fleeing North."

"You settled in St. Louis, and everything your fingers touched seemed to turn to gold. If you lost heavily through the coming of the war, you more than made amends during the years immediately following. And yet—when Lapier Tostivan found you out, demanding the return of the wealth you were to hold in trust for him or his son, you—What did you do, Stuart Meredith?"

"I never harmed him! I never knew why he failed to come back to keep the appointment he made—as Heaven hears me!"

With a trace of his old strength and pride the hunted nabob uttered these words, flashing back that malicious leer with a glow of despairing defiance. Right or wrong, he felt that he was wholly at the mercy of this brute, to whom the very word was an unknown quantity.

"Then there's a mighty big lie out somewhere, but I'll never try to make sure from which pair of lips it comes," laughed Brocky Sam, with a careless outflinging of his stumpy right hand. "If you come to my terms, what matter? If you refuse—wait a bit, my dear fellow!"

"I can bring David Tostivan to demand his rights. I can back him up with proof that can't be overset. I can produce the bond which you signed for Lapier Tostivan, and of which I was one of the witnesses, if you take the trouble to recollect. I can prove that Lapier Tostivan was foully murdered in the streets of St. Louis. And—if needs be—I can bring his death up to your very door!"

"It is false—I never harmed him!" gasped the wretched man.

"All this I can do, and will do, if you prove too obstinate. On the other hand, if you meet my terms, I'll never let David Tostivan so much as suspect his birth or rights. I'll give you back this bond. I'll go away and never cross your path again. But to bring all this about, you've got to play your part clean through."

"In the first place, you must turn Eric Alvord adrift. In the next place, you must make your daughter understand that she is to marry Nicol Faulkner. Thirdly, you are to restore to him one-half the amount of gold placed in your hands by Lapier Tostivan, and make your will, leaving the other moiety to him at your death. Lastly, you are to pay me twenty-five thousand dollars in good, clean cash, as a reward for my remarkable fidelity to the lost and injured heir—so soon to become your most precious son-in-law!"

Clearly, deliberately Brocky Sam gave his ultimatum, marking each item by tapping a stumpy forefinger on the trembling arm of the nabob. Then he rose to his feet, picking up his hat as though his business was done, though he paused to add:

"I'll give you just four-and-twenty hours to think over what I've said, Meredith, and make your final decision. I'll call on you, at the same hour, to-morrow evening. In one hand I'll carry that precious bond; in the other a warrant for your arrest on the charge of murdering Lapier Tostivan."

Without another word, or pausing for a reply from that wretched being, cowering limply in his easy-chair, Brocky Sam turned, and unlocking the library door, passed through the hall, letting himself out at the front door. And back floated his clear, careless whistle!

It came to the ears of Stuart Meredith through the raised window, and drew a low, agonized moan from his livid lips. That, even more than the brutal frankness with which Samuel Crossley had spoken, seemed to tell him how perfectly confident his enemy was of complete success.

Now that he was alone, the wretched man no longer tried to keep up the deception which he had practiced so long and successfully. Now that no human eyes could gaze upon his weakness, he abandoned all pretense. Now he was only the miserable criminal whose black sins had found him out, just when his prosperity seemed most secure.

Yet he was not at all wicked, not altogether evil.

"It was for her—for my poor child!" he groaned, his head resting on his arms as they crossed on the table. "I meant to do right, but when he came and demanded his own, I couldn't

robber—my child! He was so hard, so harsh, so insulting with his suspicions! He accused me of trying to hide from him—of trying to steal his son's inheritance! And—he would have stripped me of everything—everything—and left my babe to starve in the gutter!"

A touch of fierceness came into his voice just then, and he flung back his head until his snow-white locks fluttered. There was a wild glitter in his sunken eyes as they glared around the room, apparently looking for an enemy or an accuser.

Only for a single breath did this last. Then a hollow groan of utter wretchedness welled up in his throat, and he again cowered back in his chair, the picture of bitter remorse and despair.

He was thinking of his daughter; all he had left on earth to love and cherish; all he had left to love, honor, care for his declining years. And now—

What if she were to learn all that had stained his hand and heart in those early days? How would she look at him? How would she greet him when she learned how terribly he had sinned? Or—worse thought of all!—would she shrink from him in horror, in loathing?

Truly, his sins had found him out, though he had lived so long unmolested. Truly, he was suffering for his crimes.

Could he fight against fate, as personified by Brocky Sam? Even should he defy his charges, ruin would follow, in social if not in business circles. Even if all those bitter black charges were incapable of being fully substantiated, he knew enough would be brought to light to forever brand him as a criminal.

And Linnet? His idolized daughter? The one pure, innocent being of his love? What would it all be to her? How could she ever bear up against such a frightful discovery?

With a hoarse, choking cry of utter despair, Stuart Meredith caught up his revolver, cocking and clapping its muzzle against his temple!

CHAPTER XXXII.

A BRIDE AS A BRIBE.

BUT the end was not to come thus, nor just then. For, with the mad action of the hunted nabob, Dan Dunn silently opened the door behind which he had been listening to all, where he had witnessed everything that transpired, thanks to the glass panels set in the door and the slightly-parted drapery through which he could peer without danger of discovery on his part, and with a swift stride he caught the weapon, his sinewy palm deftly slipping beneath the hammer as it fell.

A quick wrench tore the revolver from Stuart Meredith's hand, and a firm palm pressed over his lips, stifling his cry of angry alarm as his bloodshot eyes stared into that pale, sternly handsome face.

"Not a word—not a sound to alarm your daughter or the servants, Stuart Meredith!" clearly yet guardedly uttered the Soft-hand Sport, throwing all his will-power into his eyes as he held the gaze of the nabob. "If you hope for salvation, keep silence! If you hope to keep your criminal past from her ears, try to trust in me!"

The victory was quickly won. Weakened, his nerves all shattered by what he had been forced to undergo that day and evening, Stuart Meredith was in no fit condition for making any fight. Shivering in every fiber, he sunk back into his seat, helpless for the moment.

Dan Dunn deftly unloaded the weapon, slipping the cartridges into his pocket, then seating himself in the chair so recently vacated by Brocky Sam, his face cold and stern, his gray eyes glowing with a red light as if living fire backed the pupils.

"I saved your life, Stuart Meredith, because you must make what amends lie in your power for all the wrong you have done, before death hides your shame-covered head!"

"You, too!" feebly moaned the miserable wretch. "Spare me—I can endure no more—I fear I've got my death-blow, even now!"

"I mean to spare you. I mean to foil that merciless devil who has just left you, Stuart Meredith," quickly uttered Dan Dunn, shifting his seat until his cool, firm hands could take the trembling fingers of the hunted man. "I mean to spare the world all knowledge of your past, on the sole condition that you make what amends lies in your power."

"I will do anything—sacrifice my own life, oh, so gladly! if my poor child may be spared this terrible blow! It would kill her!"

"I believe it would—almost. I know it would shadow her entire future. And not only hers, but that of a man whom I am proud to call my friend and heart-brother. And yet—Stuart Meredith, I have sworn to hunt you down, even to the foot of the gallows! I have carried a warrant for your arrest for years past. I have it now, next my heart. I could make my vow good, this very hour!"

Stuart Meredith shivered anew, shrinking away, his faintly-reviving hopes dying out before that sudden sternness. He tried to meet that burning gaze, but was unable to do so, even for a moment.

Dan Dunn seemed to have repented of his im-

pulsive promise to spare the wretched sinner, for his tones were hard and pitiless, his face cold and stern-set.

"I was in hiding, yonder," with a brief glance toward the door through which he had made his opportune appearance. "I heard all that Brocky Sam had to say, though the greater part of it was nothing new to me. For I, too, Stewart Meredith, have been trailing you down because of that Tostivan affair."

Only a feeble mean told that the nabob was listening. Only that pitiful shivering.

His utter misery might well have touched even a heart hardened against him for his black sins, but Dan Dunn gave no signs of relenting. If anything, his voice was harder, colder than before.

"Though you may never have suspected the fact, I have slowly, surely gathered sufficient proof of your crimes to bring you under the shadow of the gallows, and if I hesitate to hurry you there—"

"Mercy—for my poor child's sake!" moaned Meredith.

"Did you show mercy to the child of Lapier Tostivan? Did you show mercy to his wife—to the poor mother of the boy whose inheritance you kept at the cost of reddening your hands with kindred blood?"

There was no answer. Only a choking, gasping sigh. And with a low ejaculation of alarm, Dan Dunn hastily lifted the head of the nabob, turning his face to the light, for one breathless instant believing that death had claimed the hunted criminal.

Only for a moment, though; then he realized that it was only a simple fainting-spell, which quickly yielded to his ministrations. Bathing Meredith's face with the generous liquor, then pouring a little, drop by drop, down his throat, Dan Dunn soon had the grim satisfaction of seeing his eyes open and his thin lips show signs of life.

Putting the sorely-shaken man in a comfortable position, the Soft-hand Sport resumed his own seat, speaking slowly, distinctly, in a much milder tone than before:

"Once more, Stuart Meredith, I swear that I will not only show you unmerited mercy, not on your own account, but for the sake of your innocent daughter and that of the noble young man whose heart she has won, but I will protect you against the bold schemes of Brocky Sam and his wicked gang. I will do this—on certain conditions."

"Anything—I will promise anything!" gasped Meredith.

"In your present state of weakness I know you will," with just the trace of a sneer in his tones and upon his handsome face. "But I am not content with that. Try and collect your wits. Try to clear your brain and steady your nerves. You must do this, man!" with a swift frown as the nabob shivered violently. "Would you let your daughter see that you are so pitifully weak? Would you arouse her suspicions by your own conduct?"

"I will be strong. I will brace up. Only—spare her!"

It was truly pitiful, despite the no longer denied crimes of this man, to see how utterly broken-down he was. And only a comparatively few hours before he was so proud, so stern, so haughty! And now—the lowest of the low, the weakest of the weak!

Even Dan Dunn seemed affected by the sight, man-hunter though he avowedly was, and he gave over even the taste of vengeance which he had promised himself as a partial reward for all his past pains.

"Go down on your knees this night, Stuart Meredith, and thank God for having blessed you with such a child! For her sake I will cover your crimes from the eyes of the world! For her sake I will protect you from those who have hunted you down, only to fatten off your riches, and not through a stern love of justice."

"I will—and I'll kneel to you, dear—"

"None of that!" harshly muttered Dan Dunn, checking the miserable wreck as he tried to sink upon his knees at the feet of the one who promised him protection. "Don't make me lie—and another such hypocritical break will do that, sure!"

Meekly, tremblingly, Stuart Meredith crept back into his chair.

"Try to pretend you are a man, if nothing else," coldly added the Soft-hand Sport. "The sooner you get back a shadow of your usual manhood, the quicker all will be over for tonight. I'm going to call in your daughter and her lover, but if they should see you so broken down, how could I satisfy their wondering curiosity save by giving them an inkling of the truth?"

"Not that—not before her!" gasped Meredith, trying to lift the decanter, but failing. "If I had—in yonder!" with a faint inclination of his head in the direction of the buffet.

Dan Dunn divined his meaning, and quickly produced a decanter of cognac, himself pouring out a full glass and holding it to the livid lips of the nabob, letting him drain it dry.

Placing the decanter on the table, he resumed his seat, speaking rapidly, yet with such clear-

ness that not even that troubled brain could fail to follow his meaning throughout.

"I said I would spare you, on certain conditions, Stuart Meredith. Try and follow me now, and spare us both the pain of repeating all."

"The first of those conditions is that you make full restitution to the son and heir of Lapier Tostivan. By this I do not mean that you shall literally fulfill the conditions set forth in the bond you signed and delivered to your once partner. That called for the principal, with six per cent., the interest to be added to the main sum yearly, all to bear interest, until the bond was canceled. That, rich as you are said to be, would pretty well strip you clean! But I do mean that you shall restore the principal, to the last dollar!"

"I will—willingly," muttered Meredith, already showing an increase of strength and steadiness from that powerful dose of brandy. "But—Faulkner—"

"Brocky Sam lied to you when he swore that Nicol Faulkner was the son and heir of Lapier Tostivan," quickly interposed the Soft-hand Sport, with a sudden frown and flash of his gray eyes. "David Tostivan is a far better man than that evil-hearted stock-gambler ever dared to be!"

Stuart Meredith gave a great start, a sudden glow coming into his eyes and a flush actually tinging his cheeks as a strange, bewildering fancy swept across his unsteady brain.

"You say you know him? You know this David Tostivan?" he huskily ejaculated. "He is not—it cannot be that—"

Dan Dunn lifted a hand to check his further speech, for the first time since his entrance with a smile playing about his red lips.

"I'm doing the talking, remember, Mr. Meredith."

"But if—if Eric Alvord—"

"Is my heart-brother, and has a prominent part to play in my next condition," coolly interposed the Soft-hand Sport. "Only for him—well, I might not have been so easy on you, my dear sir!"

Though checked, Stuart Meredith was busy thinking. He more than half-believed already that Eric Alvord was none other than the heir to Lapier Tostivan!

"And as my very dear friend," pursued Dan Dunn, apparently not noticing the thoughts which kept the brain of the nabob so wildly whirling, "Eric Alvord has confided his love-secrets to me. I know that he has gained the love of Miss Meredith, and I know, also, that you have agreed to their marriage, only making it a condition that they wait until your daughter is fully of age. That would be nearly two years from now; entirely too long for them, for me, for you, for Brocky Sam and Nicol Faulkner! For as long as the prize remains free, be sure that young broker will give you and her trouble."

"But if—if he has no rightful claims?" faltered Meredith.

"He may forge others, as he has already forged these. But that don't count. My next condition is that you take back your binding proviso, leaving the young people to choose their own wedding-day."

For a brief space Stuart Meredith was silent, his head bowed, his brain busy, if outward appearances were to be taken as proof. But then he looked up, more after his usual manner, his tones steady:

"Is this all you have to impose, sir?"

It was Dan Dunn's turn to hesitate, but that was only momentary.

"All—for the present, I believe. You are feeling stronger? You can hold your own before the eyes of your daughter? Time presses, but unless you are perfectly sure, I can wait. If you need it, drink another glass of brandy."

Stuart Meredith touched the decanter, but then drew back his hand slowly, gazing at it in the lamplight as though testing his nerves. It still trembled, but was rapidly growing steadier.

Dan Dunn saw as much, and with a brisk nod of approval, he leaned over and tapped a silver call-bell sharply. A brief waiting, then the door opened, and Linnet Meredith, leaning on the arm of her lover, entered the room.

She never looked more beautiful than at that moment, though her face was a little pale, and an anxious light glowed in her eyes. She knew that something out of the ordinary was happening, though she could not even give a guess as to its nature.

Dan Dunn intercepted her as she was moving to her father's side, and holding the right hand of the lovers, he said, smilingly:

"Bless your children, my dear sir! And tell them, as you tell me, that you will never rest perfectly happy until you see them wedded one to the other!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A DOUBLE VICTORY.

BOTH Linnet and Eric were taken completely by surprise, gazing at the Soft-hand Sport in utter bewilderment until a gentle force turned them toward the nabob.

Pale, haggard, seemingly aged in the hour,

Stuart Meredith rose equal to the occasion, feeling that only through perfect submission to the will of this strange being could he hope to win immunity for his past crimes.

Then, too, it is barely possible that he yielded with a better grace because of that wonderful fancy which had flashed across his whirling brain; the fancy that perhaps Eric Alvord—whose birth was involved in such obscurity, according to his own frank confession—might, nay, *was*! David Tostivan himself.

In silence he placed his trembling hands on the bowed heads of the lovers, muttering something which, in their agitated condition, readily passed with them as a blessing.

"I wish I could find words sufficiently eloquent and grateful with which to thank you for this inestimable boon, Mr. Meredith," muttered Eric Alvord, catching the nabob's hand and bowing his head over it. "I can only say that all my future life will be devoted to that end: to proving my gratitude to you, and my love for this dear girl."

"And I—but, papa—"

Dan Dunn quickly interposed, still a little doubtful as to the ability of Stuart Meredith to carry to the end the task he had imposed upon him, without betraying to those keen if loving eyes, too much of the dangerous truth.

"Mr. Alvord—Eric," he said, taking the young lawyer's free hand, looking squarely into his eyes as he added: "You know something about me. If I were to warn you of danger impending, would you believe the words I uttered?"

"Before those of any other man on the footstool!" energetically.

"And if I were to add that this danger principally concerns the dear lady whom you love so ardently? To swear to you by all that mankind holds holy that the surest if not the sole method of saving her from this peril, is by taking her under your own protection, where she need not pass out of your sight at any hour of the day or night? Would you join your entreaties to mine, that Miss Meredith might be won over to a speedy marriage?"

Pale, trembling, fearing she scarcely knew what, Linnet watched the man as he pronounced these words. And when his meaning became perfectly clear to her confused brain, she turned with a low cry to her father.

"What is it—who is he—what does it all mean?" she half-sobbed, trying to look up into his face as the words broke from her lips.

But Stuart Meredith, though wonderfully revived by the heavy draught of strong brandy, did not care to risk that scrutiny, and firmly held her head against his bosom, murmuring:

"It is true, my pet. A great danger threatens, and his advice is the best for all concerned. And if you really love Eric—"

"Papa, I love him better than all the world!" the maiden murmured, no longer trying to lift her face or eyes. "I fear I love him better than even—"

The clear, firm tones of the Soft-hand Sport broke in upon her trembling speech.

"If all parties insist, I will try to find time in which to paint that peril, but I would rather not enter into details just at present. You, Eric Alvord, can trust to my bare word. Miss Meredith can also believe me, when her father bears witness to my perfect truth in this."

"There is only the one way by which those plotting against you all can be thoroughly and certainly discomfited; and that is, as I said before, by a speedy marriage between you two. It is terribly short warning, I admit," with a faint smile as he caught a fleeting glance from the dark eyes of Linnet Meredith, "but if we are to have a complete triumph, the wedding service must be read over you two no later than this hour to-morrow!"

Linnet shrank still closer to her parent at these words. Even Eric Alvord seemed startled by the unexpected haste thus shown. But Dan Dunn seemed to take it all for granted, and slipping a hand through the arm of the young lawyer, he briefly added:

"You will explain to Miss Meredith, my dear sir, at least enough to convince her that in this seemingly too great haste, we are acting solely for her own good. Do not say *too* much, for walls have ears, and our enemies are both bold and cunning."

"I will do my best, sir," bowed Meredith, his tones cold and even.

"Then, Miss Meredith," with a low bow toward the bewildered maiden, who stared agitatedly from face to face in a vain attempt to solve the mystery which was enveloping her and hers, "we will bid you good-night. For, unfortunately for him, I am compelled to beg Eric to accompany me."

Linnet murmured something in reply, though it would have troubled her to recall the precise words that crossed her lips. With an impulsive movement the Soft-hand Sport caught her white hand, pressing an ardent kiss upon it, then stepping back, with a muttered word to Alvord:

"You *must* come with me, Eric. There's much to be done, before the game is wholly won, even yet! Say good-night, and come!"

That this was far from being what the young lawyer most desired just then, his clouded countenance gave ample evidence, but a glance showed him Dan Dunn was in thorough earnest, and after all that had transpired, he dared not go against his wishes just then. And so, with a whispered word to Linnet, who walked slowly aside with him, he bent his head and pressed a long, passionate kiss upon her lips, unheeding the presence of others in the room.

Dan Dunn at the same time improved his opportunity by hastily warning Stuart Meredith to caution.

"Tell her only what you are absolutely obliged to, but make her understand that this marriage *must* come off to-morrow evening, here at your house, in complete privacy. I'll arrange all the details in time to let you know just what to expect. Remember—it is life or death!"

"I'll yield to your will in everything. Only—spare her the knowledge of my—my troubled past!" murmured the nabob.

"I have promised. She shall know nothing to alter her love for you," tersely responded Dan Dunn, turning away with a short, sharp cough that warned Eric Alvord the moment of parting had come.

Together the two friends left the mansion, soon clearing the spacious grounds, walking slowly along the street. Dan Dunn was gravely silent, seemingly deep buried in thought, and for some little time Eric Alvord respected his evident wish for undisturbed musings, but then his natural curiosity and interest would be held in check no longer.

"What means did you use to win the old gentleman over, Dunn? What did that scoundrel threaten him with? Was it simply an accident that pistol-shot? Why—confound it, man!" with an outburst of impatience, "can't you see I'm almost bursting with curiosity?"

"Drive the cork in tighter, pard, and trust to good luck against making a burst of it," laughed the Soft-hand Sport. "The street isn't a fit place to talk over such matters, and—What was that?"

They were just passing the mouth of a dark alley when a slight sound from the gloom caught the ever-ready ear of the Soft-hand Sport. As he uttered that ejaculation he turned to face in that direction, and most fortunate was it that he did so.

Several dark figures were gathered there, plainly with evil intent, and he had barely time to push Eric Alvord back with an effort that turned both full face in the threatened quarter, when the thugs leaped from cover, brandishing their deadly, if silent, weapons. And from the lips of the foremost ruffian hissed the words:

"Down 'em! Kill 'em both, lads!"

"Shoulder to shoulder, pard, and we've got 'em!" grated the Soft-hand Sport, as he sprang forward to meet the danger half-way, apparently forgetting his own advice even while the words were passing his lips.

As by magic a weapon filled his left hand, silent but terribly effective, cutting the air with a dull swish, but sending forth a vicious crack as it came in contact with the hard skull of the ruffian who had uttered those sanguinary words, dropping him in a quivering heap to the pavement!

And then, for a single breath, the human eye could hardly have followed the movements of any particular one in the mass: it was a wild, fierce scramble, deadly but silent, save for dull thuds and sharp cracks similar to the one by which the thug leader was prostrated.

Eric Alvord fought swiftly and desperately, giving and receiving ugly strokes, but Dan Dunn did the greater part of the work. And almost before the young lawyer could realize the peril it was at an end. Two of the thugs were fleeing at top-speed. A third was staggering away as best he could with a broken pate and blinded eyes. The fourth lay in a groaning heap just where he fell before Dan Dunn's first stroke.

"Let 'em flicker, pard!" laughed the Soft-hand Sport, checking Eric as he made a move to give chase. "I've got the head-center right here, and if we need the others he'll tell us where to look for them. Got a match? I want to take a squint at this fellow's sweet mug!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE NET BEGINS TO DRAW.

DAN DUNN held the flickering light close to the blood-marked face of the fallen thug, his other hand lightly compressing his throat, ready to check any effort toward escape on his part.

"I don't know him, but I will before the night grows much older," he said, as the match died out and dropped from his fingers. "He's the man who bade his fellow-thugs kill us both, and he can do a heap of interesting talking, I reckon, if we take hold of him right."

"Then you don't mean to turn him over to the police?"

"I'm my own police for to-night," was the grim response. "How did you fare anyway? Forgot to ask before."

"Nothing serious, though I'll have a lovely

eye on me for to-morrow night," somewhat ruefully muttered the young lawyer, gingerly touching that injured organ. "A bruise or two besides, but they don't count, if they don't show too plain. And you?"

"Not even a graze," with a low laugh. "Then that's settled. Now if you'll cast an eye around for a hack to carry a drunken friend to your office, I reckon we'll be all right."

While Alvord hastened away in search of a conveyance, Dan Dunn quickly and deftly searched his captive, removing a knife and a pistol, both of which he concealed about his own person. Then, as the thug began to recover his consciousness, the detective whispered warningly:

"Go easy, my fine fellow, or I'll run you in for keeps!"

By the dim light from the distant street-lamp, he revealed his golden badge, the sight of which caused the thug to groan again, shrinking away from that firm grip in evident terror.

"'Twas all a mistake, boss!" he mumbled, hoarsely.

"Which may fill your pockets instead of sending you to fill a cell at the Central Station, provided you are wise enough to make a clean breast of it. If not—well, I'll send you to Jefferson, sure!"

There was no reply, save a hollow groan, but Dan Dunn was not annoyed or troubled. He knew that the fellow's skull was not fractured, and he knew that his words would be well considered during the interval between their utterance and their arrival at Alvord's office.

Eric soon returned with a hack, and the two friends assisted the thug into the carriage, Dan Dunn entering with him, while Alvord took a seat beside the driver, mainly to carry out the hint given him by the Soft-hand Sport. A friend of theirs, slightly "how come you so," had tripped and fallen, hurting himself slightly; nothing more serious.

Ten minutes later found the trio safely in Eric Alvord's office, where Dan Dunn lost no time in putting his captive to the question.

He was a tall, muscular fellow with a coarse, brutalized look, but neither Dan Dunn nor Eric Alvord recognized him as any one whom they had met before.

"Look here, my fine fellow," bluntly began the Soft-hand Sport, carelessly swinging in his hand the terrible weapon with which he had so readily disabled the ruffian; a steel-handled billy, both ball and handle covered with finely-plaited linen thread. "There's only one thing that can save you from taking a trip down the river, and that is your tongue. Do you understand what that means?"

"It was all a mistake," sulkily. "You ain't the man we wanted."

"You're paying for your passage in a mighty hurry, pardner," coldly warned the Soft-hand Sport. "Men of your caliber don't make such mighty wild breaks as that comes to! If not exactly after *me*—you were after *this* gentleman," with a side nod toward Alvord. "Now the price of your liberty is just this: Who hired you rascals to slug us? What were you to be paid? Where were you to report? And to whom?"

The fellow hesitated, furtively scanning that handsome face.

"Refuse to squeal, and I'll run you down to see the chief. I'll put in a charge against you, and I'll make it stick, too! I'll have you on the cars for Jefferson City inside a week, with a board-bill made out for more years than you can afford to lose at your present age."

"If you play white, even this late, we'll meet you half-way. We'll never spread the news abroad, and never let on that we got any information through your agency. And, unless I'm mighty wide off in my guess as to your employer, he'll never bother you with questions as to how and why you failed to make the turn correct!"

"I reckon it's worth paying for, boss?" ventured the thug.

"I am paying for it, you rascal, in letting you slide through the bars without sticking tight," laughed Dan Dunn, feeling that the victory was already as good as won. "But I'll go further than that. If the man who hired you is the man I want, I'll give you enough to drown your sorrows in drink for a week. Will that do?"

"It'll have to, I reckon," with a sickly grin. "Hope my gent is the right one, boss!"

"What is his name? Who did he hire you to slug in particular?"

"Faulkner, the rich broker. And he wanted us to make dead sure of him," with a short nod toward Eric Alvord.

Dan Dunn watched him keenly, and gave a long breath of relief. He felt sure the fellow was telling them the plain truth.

"Where were you to make your report?"

"Any time was to do, but when that didn't jest suit me, he said I could find him at Cramp-ton's gaming rooms, any time before three. I reckon he was planning for an alibi," with a short, ugly laugh.

"That sounds mighty likely, but I'm taking nothing on trust, mind you, my fine fellow," coldly uttered the Soft-hand Sport. "If you've

made a single mistake in your confession, now's the time to correct it."

"I've given it to you straight as a string, boss."

"For your own sake I hope so," turning to the young lawyer: "I'll leave him here in your charge, Alvord. Keep him safe until I can test the reliability of his information. If it turns out as he says, I'll come back to pay him his price and set him free. If not—I'll come back all the same, but it will be to start him toward the pen!"

Not a little to the dismay of the fellow, Dan Dunn snapped a pair of handcuffs around his wrists before turning him over to the young lawyer. And if further proof was wanted as to his truthful confession, the bitterness with which he charged the detective with lying to him in order to gain his ends, afforded ample.

Cautioning Alvord to keep awake and on his guard, Dan Dunn left the office and started down the street at a brisk pace.

It was now close to the midnight hour, but he felt no uneasiness on that account. He knew the place called Crampton's. He knew that, as a rule, "the game" was running all night long, although against the law. But policemen are only human, and money will grease almost any palm, if the one who wishes to dispose of it is not too clumsy in his motions!

A few minutes' brisk walk carried him to the corner on which the gambling-hall was situated, and assuming his most rakish demeanor, Dan Dunn passed up the narrow flight of stairs, to rap softly at the closed door which confronted him just beyond the little landing.

A small slide in the panel was opened, and a bright light flashed upon his face and person. A broad negro face showed at the opening for a moment, but then, as though satisfied with what he saw, the ebony custodian opened the door, bowing as the Soft-hand Sport crossed the threshold.

"Things lively to-night, uncle?" drawled the detective, nodding toward another door across the ante-room. "Tiger roaring?"

"House losing, sah," grinned the dorky. "Nebbah bettah time fo' tryin' yo' luck, sah! Hope you win a heap, sah, this ebenin'!"

"If I conclude to try my luck. But I'm simply looking for a friend of mine, Mr. Faulkner, the rich young broker. Is he inside?"

"Cain't say, sah," with a knowing grin. "Nebbah know nobody, sah. 'Tain't what I'm heah fo', sah! Hab fo' look you' own sef, sah!"

As he glibly uttered these crisp sentences, the dorky opened the inner door, and the Soft-hand Sport entered the brilliantly illumined hall, where the crowd was quite large, each of the four faro tables having a double row gathered around them, silently betting.

But Dan Dunn only gave these a passing glance, for standing alone at one of the richly-carved buffets laden with liquors and cigars, he recognized the object of his quest, Nicol Faulkner himself!

No better opportunity could have been asked for, and with a swift and noiseless step Dan Dunn reached the side of the broker, tapping his arm gently, smiling brightly in his startled face as he muttered:

"Kick up a row, and I'll openly arrest you, my man! See—I've got you lined, for keeps!" and the muzzle of an ugly-looking derringer showed for an instant in his palm, then the hard muzzle pressed directly against the broker's ribs.

"Who are you? What does this outrage mean?"

"Dan Dunn, the Soft-hand Sport! And it means that I'm here to take you, dead or alive! Choose for yourself, Nicol Faulkner!" came the hard retort, and smilingly though Dan Dunn looked just then, there was an expression in his gray eyes that doubly warned the cowed schemer.

Without a word he yielded, and with that weapon touching his side, with an arm locked in his, he suffered the Soft-hand Sport to lead him out of the gaming-hall, a prisoner!

CHAPTER XXXV.

BAITING A TRAP FOR SAMMY.

BRIGHT and early the next morning a bowed figure, supporting unsteady footsteps with a stout cane, curled in a snake-like spiral of some native wood, slowly hobbled across the dilapidated plank-walk and up to the front of the dingy brick building inhabited by Belle Shado and the noted confidence-man, Kit Melady.

A long, patriarchal beard concealed the lower part of his face, and a battered slouch hat drooped over his eyes, so that Shady Belle would have gained but scant satisfaction from one of her sly glances through the shuttered window to the left of the front door. But she made no such attempt, promptly answering the slow, peculiar tapping on the panel which her early caller gave.

"No one to home. Business dropped until better weather," she uttered, coldly, barely opening the door wide enough to show part of her face, but then a low, startled cry parted her lips as she recognized a dreaded voice:

"Glad to hear it, Belle, but I want to come in, all the same:

For just an instant it seemed as though the frightened woman would try the trick that had failed her once before with this same cool customer; but Dan Dunn had little fear of that. He did not even put out hand or foot to hinder the closing of the door in his face.

"It is you?" trembled the woman, slowly opening the door to give him admittance. "I have kept my pledge faithfully, and—"

"And Kitisie is improving, I sincerely trust?" smiled the disguised detective, hurriedly adding, in a tone that barely reached the ears of the frightened decoy: "Who's in the house besides you two? Where is Brocky Sam?"

"Not here. I haven't seen or heard of him since yesterday. Don is up with Kit while I get breakfast."

Dan Dunn bent his head in thought for a little space, then said:

"Don will answer, I reckon! No," with a faint smile showing through the cunningly-imitated lines and wrinkles of age. "I don't mean to run him in. I just want a little friendly talk with him, and if he shows himself of good stuff we'll be as ready to swear by each other as you and I are right now—eh, Belle?"

"Yes, sir—of course," faltered the woman, striving hard to conceal the strong terror with which this man inspired her.

"Bring him down, then. I'll wait in the parlor where you and I had our little confab. You needn't mind telling him just who I am. One of the family will come close enough to the mark, I reckon."

Belle Shado seemed only too ready to do anything by which she might win the good will of this hunter of men whose word could send her husband "over the road" for a long term of years if he chose, and in a very few minutes the burly figure of Don Fisher entered the parlor, to stop short with a smothered cry of angry amazement as he recognized the face of the detective, now free from disguising beard.

"Come in, Don, and don't make a holy show of yourself after that fashion," coolly called out the Soft-hand Sport, beckoning with one finger as he spoke. "I forgot to thank you for my nice little ride of the other night. Don't make me remember it too clearly, if you are wise!"

"Don't anger him, or all is lost!" muttered Belle, close at his rear. "He swore he meant us no harm, if we only helped him out. Trust him, Don—we've got to trust him!"

Don Fisher entered the room, reluctantly enough, and Belle Shado followed him, tremblingly yet hopefully. Dan Dunn saw this, and nodded his approval.

"I'll not forget it, my good girl, when settling-day comes. You'll find I'm as good to deal with as I'm bad to deal against."

"I'm thinking of Kit—if no harm comes to him, I don't matter."

"No harm shall come to any one of you three, unless you go flat against my little game. If you do what you can to help me out, you'll fare all the better for it. Now—go finish your housework, Belle. Don and I want a little talk together."

This was taking a good deal for granted, judging from the uneasy eyes of the burly crook, but he dared not make open resistance just then, and he meekly took the seat nodded at by the Soft-hand Sport.

"Now, Fisher, I reckon Belle has told you who and what I am. If so, you know that I can send you over the road by a simple crook o' my wrist, for the little job you helped put up on me the other day."

The counterfeit expressman shifted uneasily on his seat, licking his thick lips, casting a wistful glance over his shoulder as though he sorely felt the need of backing, even though the only one nigh was of the so-called weaker sex.

"I know it, boss; but she said—she told me you wouldn't pull us if we kept shady and let the cat die. And so—"

"I counted you in, Don, because I liked your grit in sticking to Kit when he couldn't help himself," frankly interposed the detective. "It's not every pal that would stay by a crook when he saw nippers in every shadow that came his way."

"I couldn't leave Belle, you know," muttered Fisher, actually blushing as though he felt ashamed of so weak an excuse for acting a manly part. "She went pretty nigh crazy when she saw how dumb and ghost-like Kit looked. Somehow—well, I stayed by her, and that's all!"

"The wisest thing you've been guilty of for an age, I'm open to lay big odds," laughed the Soft-hand Sport, though there was a light in his gray eyes that wonderfully encouraged the burly crook. "Only for that, you'd be lying by the heels in the cooler, waiting for a pass to Jefferson City. But that don't count in this new deal."

"Do you reckon you could run across Brocky Sam, this morning?"

Don Fisher started, turning a shade paler as his lower jaw dropped just a trifle.

"I know that he's at the head of your gang, Fisher," quickly added the detective, drawing

his chair a little closer to the one occupied by the other. "I know that you have sworn to stick together, share and share alike. And that is right why I count on your help in bringing Sam Crossley to book."

"I won't get him into any scrape if I knows it, boss," surlily muttered Fisher, his face assuming a hard, dogged expression.

"Not even if you knew Sammy was trying to play a big grab game? Not if you was convinced he wanted to share without sharing?"

"Is he wanting that? I hain't seen the proofs yet!" suspiciously.

"Then you are taking a share in the big game against the Nabob of Quality Hill?" smiled Dan Dunn significantly.

Don Fisher changed countenance, but not through shame or confusion born of his own misdeeds. Like a flash he saw that Brocky Sam had indeed been playing the family a foul trick. One by one evidences, all slight in themselves but amounting to considerable when added together as his busy brain was arranging them, flashed across his mind, explaining much which had puzzled him in the actions and manner of the pock-marked crook of later days.

Dan Dunn kept his peace, well content to let the crook work for him. His keen eyes followed the workings of his mind pretty accurately, and told him that complete victory was but a question of moments.

"If I knew it for dead sure!" muttered Fisher, his hands clinching tightly. "If you can only show me that for certain!"

The Soft-hand Sport drew still closer, speaking in guarded tones, apparently telling the whole plot without reserve, though of course he was careful to say nothing which could be brought forward against the nabob himself. But he soon succeeded in convincing Don Fisher that Brocky Sam had proved false to his vows, by keeping secret from "the family" the details of his greatest, boldest stroke for a fortune.

"Curse him from top to toe!" viciously grated the enraged thug. "I'll even up with him, if it puts me in stripes for twenty years!"

"Better than that, my man," laughed the Soft-hand Sport, pleasantly, feeling that his trick was nearly ready to turn. "You take the revenge, and let me do the work. How does that suit you?"

"You'll send him up?"

"I can give him twenty years, if not more," was the cool reply.

"Then say what you want done, and I'll do my share without a cent pay for my trouble!" grimly nodded Fisher.

"You think you can find Brocky Sam, then, this morning?"

Don Fisher nodded assent.

"Good enough! Go to him as soon as you can. Tell him you're just from this house, sent to find him and bring him back with you as quickly as possible."

"If he shouldn't come?" hesitated Fisher, frowning. "He's a mighty stiff-neck, Sammy is, when the fit strikes him. And he went away from here in a mighty hot huff when Belle wouldn't—By the Lord!" with sudden fire flashing into his eyes as the thought struck him. "That does prove it, too! He wanted Belle to swear she was young Alvord's wife, up at the nabob's house! He said that much, but he never let on that there was such big money in it—the tricky cur!"

"You've hit it, pardner," nodded the Soft-hand Sport, concealing his secret annoyance. "He meant for you folks to do the work, then step aside while he ate the pie. But he'll hardly set tooth into it, if you follow my directions to the letter."

"Find Brocky Sam. Say that you are just from here, and that Nicol Faulkner, the young real-estate broker, sent you after him. Say that he is here in hiding, afraid of being arrested for having been mixed up in a row where Eric Alvord—don't forget the name—got badly slugged last night. Tell him this, and be sure Brocky will follow your lead as swiftly as though you had a ring in his nose."

"If he don't, it won't be for slick lying on my part, boss," laughed the burly crook, rising from his seat as though in a hurry to carry out his instructions.

Dan Dunn also arose, and with a hand on each shoulder of the thug, he gazed keenly into his eyes. They never flinched. Fisher was in deadly earnest then if never before.

"All right, pardner," nodded the Soft-hand Sport, quietly. "You'll turn the trick. And maybe it'll leave you better off in the end. Anyway, I'll promise that no harm comes to you for leading Sammy into my little web."

"I'll let him in ahead of me, boss, and if he smokes the trap too quick, I'll lend him one under the ear my own self," grimly uttered the fellow as he turned and left the house.

Belle Shado came to the door of the kitchen at the sound of the opening door, and Dan Dunn passed through to where she was busy preparing some light dainty to tempt the appetite of Kit Melady.

With real interest in the case, he questioned her about Kit, and felt really pleased to learn that that awful stupor had yielded to medical treatment.

"Doctor says he'll be himself again in another week, if nothing comes to upset him," the woman added, with tears in her voice as well as in her eyes. "I told him how kind you were to promise not to run him in, and he was ready to agree with me when I begged him to begin a new and better life. I swear to you that we'll drop all crookedness from this time on, sir."

Beyond a doubt she was in earnest, and Dan Dunn secretly trusted the good resolution might be sacredly kept. That was better than running Kit into State's Prison.

Seated beside the same window through which Belle Shado had taken her first look at him, the Soft-hand Sport patiently watched and waited for the coming of his new ally and his intended victim. Though nearly two hours were thus consumed, they were not entirely wasted, for Dunn had many minor points to carefully arrange in order in his busy brain before the coming of nightfall, when he counted on bringing his long trail to a successful ending.

At the end of that period, Brocky Sam came tumbling out of a hack, his face dark with anger and apprehension. And without waiting for Don Fisher, he rushed up to the house and entered, only to hear:

"Hands up, Samuel Crossley! I arrest you—dead or alive!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BROCKY SAM UPSETS HIS CASTLE.

"Not a sound from your lips, Nicol Faulkner!" sternly whispered the Soft-hand Sport, his grip tightening on the neck of the young broker as his lips brushed his ear.

It was a peculiar scene, which merits a brief description.

It was night outside Belle View, the residence of Stuart Meredith and his charming daughter, Linnet. Inside were lights, but dim and indistinct where a number of men were gathered: among them Dan Dunn, his hand lightly clasped on the neck of Nicol Faulkner, whose wrists were connected by a pair of handcuffs; Brocky Sam, similarly ornamented, with two silent guards close behind him as he sat, like his fellow-plotter, in a chair, staring at the impressive tableau just beyond them.

A thin screen of lace was carelessly brought together where the heavy curtains drawn between the two parlors parted a few feet in the center, affording a fair view of what was transpiring beyond.

A tall, clerical-looking man was standing before a young couple, whose hands were joined, whose heads were reverently bowed as they listened to the solemn words that fell from his lips.

Eric Alvord and Linnet Meredith!

Stuart Meredith stood near them, his arms folded, his face grave, but showing no outward signs of the sore trials through which he had been forced to pass of recent days.

And when the minister pronounced the final words, making the loving pair man and wife, the Nabob of Quality Hill shook the one warmly by the hand, then passionately kissed the other as he pressed her close to his heart before resigning her to her husband.

"Be good to her, my son—she is worthy all your love!" the old man brokenly uttered as he drew back.

At a sign from Dan Dunn, Robert Turnbull glided forward and gently rolled the sliding-doors shut, cutting off all view beyond. Another sign caused the lights to be turned on, and then Dan Dunn left his station behind Nicol Faulkner to sharply sound the silver call-bell.

He seated himself at the table, taking a number of papers from his pocket, carefully running them over as though in search of some particular one, or else to satisfy himself that he had not mislaid any. This was hardly completed to his satisfaction, when a side door opened and Stuart Meredith, leaning on the arm of Eric Alvord, entered the room.

Dunn bowed gravely to the pale but sternly composed nabob. Eric placed a chair for him, then sat down himself. Nicol Faulkner tried to laugh in mockery of all this ceremony, but at a sign from the Soft-hand Sport, Turnbull deftly slipped a thick muffler over his mouth, effectually stifling his angry outburst at this fresh outrage, as he evidently deemed it.

The Soft-hand Sport rose to his feet, one hand leaning on the table as he gazed steadily into the dark, sullen, pock-marked face of the burly crook before him, gravely demanding:

"Your name is Samuel Crossley, I believe?"

Brocky Sam nodded his head in prompt assent.

"You have followed the sea for a living?"

"Ever since I was a cub big enough to go as cabin-boy, sir."

"You used to make New Orleans your home while on land, as a rule?"

"Ay, ay, sir! And I wish I was back there right now!" with a poor effort at a laugh.

"Stick to your text, please, Mr. Crossley, and let me play the clown when nothing else will suffice," coldly uttered the Soft-hand Sport. "Of course you must have served under a number of employers. Among that number did you ever serve a firm known as Tostivan & Meredith?"

"For a round dozen years, sir, by and large. If Mr. Meredith—"

"Is simply a spectator and auditor at present, Mr. Crossley. Try to believe you and I are the only two persons in the room, until I give you leave to be more personal in your remarks."

Brocky Sam growled something under his breath, but ventured no open response to this second rebuff.

"While you were serving this firm of Tostivan & Meredith, were you ever called upon to do a bit of work quite foreign to your usual duty as ship-master?"

"I remember one little job, sir."

"And that was—what?"

"Doing a bit of tattoo work, sir."

"That's the point we are most deeply interested in, just now. And as we want to get at the bottom facts—to learn everything connected with that little job, as you call it, suppose you take your own method of telling it. Only—bear in mind, Mr. Crossley—we want plain facts, without any flourishes. We want only what you absolutely know, through your own hearing, sight or other senses. Do you fully take in my meaning?"

Brocky Sam nodded assent. Though the words came smooth and quiet enough, conveying nothing more than their open meaning to the rest, the burly crook knew well enough that his own future hung on the manner in which he picked his words. He knew that nothing was to be told there to cast a single stain on the good name of Stuart Meredith. And though he never hated the cold, stern nabob more bitterly than he did at that moment, he dared not tell the whole truth after that warning.

"Well, it's a mighty curious yarn, take it by and large," he said, speaking deliberately, like one who is determined to be perfectly conscientious in his narrative, omitting nothing, adorning naught. "Not the tattooing, for I've done lots of that, but this particular job, taking all that went afore and after it, sir."

"One day Lapier Tostivan came to me and asked if I could do a neat job of tattooing. I told him I could. I noticed that he was more than usually stirred up about something, but he was always excitable, and the fancy slipped me the next minute."

"Well, he said there was no time like the present, and so took me at once to the office, where I'd often been before, both to report arrival and take my departure on a fresh voyage. There I found his partner, Stuart Meredith. And with him was a little kid—I mean the infant son of Lapier Tostivan, named David."

"You were asked to tattoo a certain mark on the left shoulder of that infant, behind his back? I am correct, I believe?"

Brocky Sam nodded assent.

"Describe that mark, will you?"

"A circle, formed of open links, like a chain. Inside the circle a date: March 4th, 1859. Just below this date, two letters, D. F., those being the initials of the kid's name, you understand."

"Were you told the reason of this piece of business?"

"Never a hint, your Honor," was the prompt reply.

"You went away without asking any questions, of course. Now—you may explain why you copied that mark on another child?"

Nicol Faulkner gave a violent start, trying to speak, and only for the prompt action of the white-haired, white-bearded man—the same person whom Eric Alvord met in the corridor at the Hotel Brunswick—he would have sprung to his feet in his excitement.

Brocky Sam scowled blackly as the noise drew his eyes that way, but a sharp rap on the table by the knuckles of the Soft-hand Sport quickly claimed all his attention.

"You heard what I said, Crossley. Why did you repeat that identifying mark on another infant? Tell us all about it, please."

"Because I suspected something was wrong," muttered Brocky Sam, in the tone and manner of one who is making a confession greatly against his will. "Because I knew, from certain rumors, that—"

"Stick to your text, Samuel!" sternly warned the detective.

"Ain't I? Didn't you want to know all about it? How can I make it clear without saying something of—"

"You thought there was a possible chance for palming this second child, which you marked, off as the real son and heir of Lapier Tostivan, of course?" coldly uttered the Soft-hand Sport.

"That's just what I did!" with a sully leer.

"And only for you—"

"This child which you took the trouble to brand, in imitation of the first, was your own son, I believe, Crossley?"

"He was. My wife had just died. The kid was all we had. I reckoned the brand, as you call it, would serve to keep him from going astray. And—what's the use?" in sullen desperation. "You've got me foul. Yes, I thought of bringing him forward as young Tostivan, if ever—"

"Your son is still living? Is he present this evening?"

"That's my boy, though he'll never thank me for claiming him!" the pock-marked schemer muttered, nodding his head toward Nicol Faulkner.

Once more the gray-haired man was forced to grip the broker tightly in order to keep him from leaving his seat. But Dan Dunn never gave him a glance, his voice slow and impressive as he added:

"I believe David Tostivan disappeared. Have you any idea where the real heir to Lapier Tostivan may be found to-night?"

Brocky Sam hesitated an instant, then lifted his manacled hands and pointed toward the astonished young bridegroom, saying:

"I don't know, unless he's Eric Alvord!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TURNING SHADOWS INTO LIGHT.

A low cry of wondering amazement broke from the lips of the young lawyer at these words, and he stared into the pock-marked face of the ex-ship-captain, then looked toward the Soft-hand Sport, who made a quick sign with his hand. With an effort Eric Alvord checked the words which were rising in his throat, content to let Dan Dunn have his way.

The detective was still standing beside the table. His gray eyes moved slowly around the little circle, pausing for an instant at each, as though desirous of learning just how his curious revelations were being received as far as they had been permitted to go.

Stuart Meredith could not have been paler than he was when he first entered the room on the arm of his newly-made son-in-law, but he showed considerably more agitation. He was an old man, and his nerves had been terribly tried of late days.

Those gray eyes lingered longest on the face of Nicol Faulkner, and the white-bearded man who stood close at his back, plainly anticipated orders to remove the prisoner from the room before further work was done. His thin but sinewy fingers closed on the broker's arm, but then a motion from Dan Dunn caused him to relax his grasp, once more standing on guard silent and motionless as a marble statue.

"Samuel Crossley, you have spoken up freely, frankly, truthfully as I have ample occasion to know. And in tearing down the airy castles which you have spent so many years in erecting, brick by brick, stone by stone, mingling lies with the truth, you have earned a mighty big rebate which will be allowed you on settling day."

"But you were not able to tell the whole story of the Tostivans, and I am going to do what I can to clear away the mists which have covered their history ever since the war."

Stuart Meredith bowed his head on a hand, trying hard to keep hidden the cold tremor which seized upon his nerves. He knew that his most severe trial was coming now, and he tried to collect his powers to bear up against the blow in a manner which should, at least, keep his newly-made relative ignorant of his past sins.

Just the shadow of a smile curled the lips of the Soft-hand Sport at this, but he gave no other sign, speaking slowly, distinctly:

"I do not think it necessary for me to enter into full explanation, at this point, of the motives which governed Lapier Tostivan in taking the first step in the little drama, by means of which Samuel Crossley came very near making the heaviest haul of his entire life."

Brocky Sam gave a hollow groan at this, but said naught.

"Enough that Lapier Tostivan had his infant son marked for future identification, in case he, the parent, should die or from any other cause be unable to visit his former partner for the purpose of recovering his fortune in exchange for the deed which Stuart Meredith signed."

"The money is ready and waiting for its proper owner," muttered the nabob, lifting his head for an instant.

Dan Dunn bowed gravely, silently, then once more resumed:

"I am not going to trace the wanderings of Lapier Tostivan and his son step by step through all those long years. Enough that it can be done, if necessary, for a close and complete record was kept by the father first, then by the son."

"The Civil War broke out, and Lapier Tostivan joined the Southern army, having placed his boy in a comparatively secure position. He fought through the war with credit to himself, and there were stars on his shoulder when the curtain fell at Appomattox Court House."

"Naturally his thoughts went back to his partner and his fortune after the smoke of battle fairly cleared from his brain, for he had nothing save the garments he wore at the time, and men must live. So, as quickly as possible, he went to Orleans and asked after Meredith."

"No one seemed to know aught of him. His very name appeared to have been forgotten. All memory of the past appeared to have been obliterated by the storm of war which had swept over the land. But then, almost by accident, Lapier Tostivan learned that Stuart Meredith

had disposed of all his property and left for the North, early in the war."

"Only a poor remnant!" muttered the nabob. "Nearly everything was lost—sacrificed—before I could get away!"

"Another man might have been suspicious, but that was not Lapier Tostivan's nature. He felt that if he could once find Stuart Meredith, all would be well with him and his son. And so, getting work that paid enough to keep life in himself and little David, he wrote in every direction to old correspondents of the firm, asking information in regard to Stuart Meredith. But not one favorable answer came to him through all those weary months. No one seemed to be able to tell him anything of the missing man. It was as though he had vanished from the face of the earth!"

"Never mind entering more fully into those troubled years. I have given you a faint idea how Lapier Tostivan set to work. Enough that he persisted in his quest, working one month to gain money enough to carry him to another city, where his search might be renewed. And so on until he reached St. Louis!"

Stuart Meredith covered his face with his hands, shivering violently for a brief space. Wonderingly Eric Alvord knelt beside him. And with a desperate effort the nabob recovered his former cold dignity, to all outward appearance. There was so much at stake!

"To all appearance, to all report, Stuart Meredith was one of the richest men in all that great city, and Lapier Tostivan, never once suspecting evil of his cousin and former partner, hastened to pay the nabob a visit, never thinking it necessary to lose time in going after the bond which he had left with his son, at his boarding-place.

"It would not be an easy matter to paint that interview. Enough that it was terribly disappointing to both parties. Stuart Meredith had long since come to regard Lapier Tostivan as dead and the deed or bond destroyed. Only for this, he might have proved himself the honest and true man of other years. As it was, he reluctantly admitted the justness of the claim, and said he would see what he could do toward canceling it, when the bond was forthcoming.

"Harder still is it to tell the plain truth about what followed," even more gravely added the Soft-hand Sport, unheeding the low groan which broke from the pallid lips of the nabob. "But the whole truth *must* be told, though the heavens fall!"

"Stuart Meredith could not bear the thought of losing the heavy amount, which he had so long considered his own. And so—he set an armed ruffian on the track of his former partner, to rob him of the sole proof by means of which he might gain his own.

"More hurt than angry, Lapier Tostivan hastened to secure his papers, and then to keep the appointment made by his cousin. But while on his way, that night, he was assaulted from behind, knocked helpless and robbed! Not by the tool dispatched by Stuart Meredith, however, for another unscrupulous hand got ahead of him!"

Brocky Sam broke into a harsh, ugly laugh as he growled:

"Why not? Had I stuck to the track for so many years only to see another dog steal my bone? Well, I reckon not, now!"

Stuart Meredith was staring wildly from one face to another, his own the picture of strangely mingled emotions. But as he heard Brocky Sam virtually admit having dealt the blow which, for so long a time, he had believed branded him as a murderer, through his hired tool, a choking cry escaped his lips, and with a broken effort at thanksgiving, he would have fallen to the floor, only for the supporting arms of Alvord.

Dan Dunn glanced at the recumbent figure, but coldly resumed:

"A patrolman found the bleeding form, and had it conveyed to the hospital. There the surgeons pronounced his injuries fatal, and appended to a brief account of his finding, in the morning papers, was the account of his death. The name was given in full, for though the bond was taken by Brocky Sam, enough other papers were left on the body to identify the luckless wretch.

"But newspapers are not infallible, strange to say," with a faint smile that momentarily lighted up his pale, stern face, "and though Lapier Tostivan was pronounced dead, and his biography given by one who had known him in his prime as a merchant and ship-owner, he still lived on, day after day, month after month! And in the course of time he was discharged from hospital as cured in body, though his mind and memory were greatly impaired. He could recognize his son, even as the lad recognized him, but that was all. The past was but a dreamy, misty blank to him, and he could not even recall his own name!"

Pale, trembling, looking like a man haunted by ghosts, Stuart Meredith looked and listened until this point. Then, breaking away from his son-in-law, he dropped on his knees at the feet of the Soft-hand Sport, brokenly sobbing:

"Say that he yet lives! Tell me that I have not his blood upon my breaking heart! Tell me

where I may find him, to make what reparation is yet possible! For the love of Heaven I beg you tell me!"

For an instant Dan Dunn gazed down upon him coldly. Then—

The white-bearded man guarding Nicol Faulkner stepped forward.

"It is for *you* to say, Lapier Tostivan! Can you forgive him?"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"ALL IS WELL!"

LAPIER TOSTIVAN stooped and lifted the erring nabob to his feet, supporting him thus while their eyes met.

Wonder, doubt, hope and fear, all mingled in the face of Stuart Meredith, for even yet he could not bring himself to believe that the cousin, of whose death he had felt guilty for so many years, was living and well—was now gazing into his sunken eyes, his warm grasp causing the blood to tingle as it coursed through his veins.

"Cousin Stuart!" at length uttered the being whom the Soft-hand Sport had, as it were, summoned from the grave.

"It is—you are living!" gasped the nabob, then bowing his head as the hot tears blinded him, faintly uttering: "Forgive—on my knees I beg your forgiveness—for my poor child's sake!"

There was no immediate response. Lapier Tostivan had suffered so much through the action of this sinner! He had lost so many long years out of his prime! It was hard to speak forgiveness—very hard!

Dan Dunn stepped forward, gently touching his arm. Their eyes met for an instant, and the victory was won.

"I will—I do forgive you all your sins against me, Cousin Stuart," the old man said, his tones gravely gentle as he added: "I do forgive you everything, but I could never have found the strength to bury the past, only for—*David!*"

"Yes, father?"

"Thank him—my noble, generous, kind-hearted son, Cousin Stuart!"

The Soft-hand Sport smiled brightly as he caught the trembling hand of the bewildered nabob between his, pressing it warmly as he uttered:

"Rather, thank your own child, and your child's husband, Mr. Meredith. Only for them, I fear I would not be pleading your cause now. Only for them—but let the dead past bury its dead."

Just in time to receive the joyous greeting of Eric Alvord, his honest face glowing with perfect happiness, all trouble on his father-in-law's account forgotten for the time being.

"Put it there, pardner!" he cried, laughing through the tears that sprung unbidden to his eyes as he ardently shook those small, firm hands, almost as though he was working for dear life at the brake of an old-time fire-engine.

"I always *knew* that we'd ought to have been relatives, and now we *are*! If I wasn't a just-married man, I'd be in for going out and covering all Kansas City with a lurid coat of paint!"

"Can't we postpone that little expedition, pard?" laughed the Soft-hand Sport, no whit less delighted than the young lawyer. "Remember that I haven't yet congratulated you, nor my new-found cousin. And—is it allowable for one of my remote degree to salute the bride?"

"Come and ask her, man!" laughed Alvord, dragging him away.

Shortly after this, a closed carriage drove up to the door, and under escort of Robert Turnbull, both Brocky Sam and Nicol Faulkner were taken away to pass the night at the Central Station, as the first fruit of their crimes.

They left perfect happiness behind them. Perfect even in the case of Stuart Meredith, who seemed to forget that if his hired tool had not actually carried out his orders, he was none the less guilty at heart for trying to compass the ruin if not death of his cousin. But when he fully realized that his one-time partner was alive and well, and had completely forgiven him his wrongs, what wonder if the nabob was happy?

All the more so that David Tostivan—no longer "Dan Dunn,"—promised him Linnet Alvord should never even have cause for suspecting anything was being concealed from her. The story could easily enough be twisted awry to throw all the blame on the broad shoulders of Brocky Sam, and the blushing young bride should never be wiser.

There was still much to be explained by the "Soft-hand Sport," before the entire mystery was cleared up, but he made short work of it.

It seemed that Lapier Tostivan, after fleeing with his child from New Orleans, firm in his belief of his wife's disgrace, changed his name, and never resumed it again till that very night. True, he had papers on his person when picked up in the streets of St. Louis to be taken to the hospital, which identified him as Lapier Tostivan, but they were simply papers pertaining to the old partnership, which he had brought to

help convince Stuart Meredith he was what he claimed.

Raised in ignorance of his real name and fortunes, little David Tostivan watched over his father until he was discharged from hospital, then fought the battle of life for them both. Only by snatches, by broken sentences and muttered words during brief intervals when the dark cloud momentarily lifted from the injured brain of his father, did he begin to suspect the existence of a great mystery; but he was unable to perfect it, hard as he tried, until Lapier Tostivan recovered his memory, after a severe spell of brain-fever.

When he knew all, David Tostivan, then a man grown, declared that he would never give over the quest until he found either the dwelling-place or the grave of their false relative.

It was during one of his expeditions, following a false clew, that led to the preservation of his life by Eric Alvord. The story would consume too much space to give it in full, and the results are all that interest us, anyway. Only for that generous action—only for risking his life to save that of an entire stranger—the end might have been far different from what we find it.

Thanks to Eric Alvord, more than aught else, Stuart Meredith was permitted to escape the just penalty of his sins.

And yet—had he escaped? His own answer would be very different, beyond a doubt. He had suffered almost worse than death during those few days last past. Brocky Sam had avenged the man whom his ruthless hand had robbed and sent to the hospital!

It was through the restored memory of Lapier Tostivan that Soft-hand Sport struck the trail of Brocky Sam, the ex-ship-captain who had marked the infant for future identification. It seems that he had recognized his own employee in the instant before being struck down by his heavy hand, and with reviving memory this fact was also recalled.

Nicol Faulkner was taken East to answer to a charge of forgery. He was found guilty, and sent to prison for ten years.

Brocky Sam was turned loose, that being the condition on which he consented to confess all his misdoings to Soft-hand Sport. But he was very nearly at the end of his rope, as it shortly proved. In a drunken affray, back in New Orleans, he was stabbed to the heart, his assailant escaping arrest.

Kit Melady and Belle Shado, as she was called, though undoubtedly the wife of the tall confidence man, repeated their pledge of living honest lives for the future. They left Kansas City for Chicago, and according to the last accounts, were faithfully keeping their promise.

As for Don Fisher, he bore them company, but there is some talk of his having "fallen from grace."

In order to avert all gossip, it was deemed best that Linnet and Eric should go through another ceremony, with more witnesses than followed them through the first ordeal. And so it was arranged. There was a grand ceremony at one of the churches. And everybody said "how lovely she was dressed!"

And every man wondered if the rising young lawyer was smart enough to fully appreciate the treasure he had won?

And David Tostivan acted as "best man."

THE END.

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